Providing Social Support for Siblings of Children with Autism: An Evaluation of the Sibshop Model

Melissa L. Zona, Kristin V. Christodulu, and V. Mark Durand

Introduction

Siblings of children with autism may experience more behavioral and social problems than their peers (Bagenhorn & Gillberg, 1991; Gold, 1993; Rodrigue, Griffith, & Morgan, 1993) and have a different relationship with their brother or sister (Kaminsky & Dewey, 2001; McAuley, Sloan, & Simmons, 1986). Research suggests that support groups for children with autism can have a positive impact on siblings (Lobato, 1985; McLinden, Miller, & Deprey, 1991). The largest sibling support program currently available for siblings of children with special needs is Sibshops (Meyer & Vadaey, 1994). However, no empirical research has been conducted on this model. The purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of Sibshops on siblings of children with autism spectrum disorder and the relationship with the brother or sister with autism. The study looked specifically at post-intervention changes in social skills (e.g. cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control) and problem behaviors (e.g. externalizing, internalizing, and hyperactivity). Changes in the sibling relationship were also examined in the areas of awareness, feelings, having fun, helping, and advocacy. It was hypothesized that a result of participation in a series of Sibshops, siblings of children with autism would show an increase in social skills, a decrease in problem behaviors, and an improvement in their sibling relationship.

Method

Participants

In order to participate in the workshops, the children needed to be between 7 and 12 years of age and have a brother or sister with an autism spectrum disorder. Twenty children participated in one of three series of Sibshops and data is available for eight of the participants (mean age = 9).

Measures

Prior to the first workshop and following the last workshop in the series, both parents and children completed the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990), a multi-rater assessment designed to evaluate a range of social skills and behavior problems of children. The student form (elementary level) is a 34-item questionnaire standardized for children in third through sixth grade. The parent form (elementary level) is a 55-item questionnaire standardized for children in kindergarten through sixth grade. In order to examine the siblings’ relationship with their brother or sister and the effects Sibshops may have on this relationship, the parents were given the Sibling Need and Involvement Profile (SNIP: Fish, McCaffrey, Bush, & Puskas, 1995) to complete prior to and following the series of workshops. The SNIP is a 28-item questionnaire designed to assess awareness, feelings, having fun, helping, and advocacy.

Social Skills - Student Form

Overall, the results of the child self-report on the SSRS do not support the hypothesis that there would be a positive change in social skills following the series of workshops.

Results

Social Skills - Parent Form

Overall, the results of the parent self-report on the SSRS do not convincingly support the hypothesis that there would be a positive change in social skills following the series of workshops.

Discussion

In the present study, support was found for the hypothesis that Sibshops would result in positive changes in the sibling relationship. Specifically, the greatest change in the positive direction was found in the area of awareness. Similar to other research on sibling support programs (McLinden et al., 1991), Sibshops were not found to be effective in improving social skills or decreasing problem behaviors in siblings of children with an autism spectrum disorder. One recent study (Lobato & Kao, 2002) of a sibling support group which included a parent component did find positive results in this area, suggesting that incorporating parents into the program and using the family context may lead to greater results. The present study is limited by the small sample size and lack of a control group. Future research should correct these limitations, as well as examine the model longitudinally and look more closely at the changes in the sibling relationship.