Measuring Speech When They Don’t Speak: Assessment Techniques for Children with Selective Mutism

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INTRODUCTION
- Selective Mutism (SM) is defined as persistent failure to speak in specific social situations (e.g., school, with classmates) where speaking is expected, despite speaking in other situations (e.g., home, with parents; APA, 2000).
- Most practitioners and agents of change (e.g., teachers) have limited experience working with children with SM due to its low prevalence rate. Due to the heterogeneous nature of these children, SM recommendations and treatment approaches may be ineffective without identifying specific social behaviors and a thorough assessment.
- Whereas research has demonstrated the effectiveness of using behavioral strategies with children with SM, minimal information exists regarding clear identification of outcome variables, specific interventions, and progress monitoring techniques to evaluate effectiveness (Krysan, 2003).

PROCEDURES

Pre-Assessment Planning
- Devise a data collection plan for initial and future assessment.
- Define child's selective mutism based upon behavioral principles.
- Identify outcome variables.
- Collect data on direct and specific measures of communication.
- Analyze data.
- Devise an intervention plan / continue data collection.
- Assess for social validity/Follow-up plan.

Guide to Initial Assessment
- How to gather data:
  - Use multiple subjective measures from a variety of sources (e.g., interviews, multidisciplinary reports, surveys, and child report from settings in which s/he is talking).
- What data to gather:
  - Child's social behavior patterns (verbal and non-verbal communication).
  - Types of persons and settings in which the child speaks.
- Estimates of frequency of speech in various situations.
  - Recorded antecedents and consequences (e.g., opportunities to respond, reactions of others).
  - Strengths (e.g., academic skills) & deficits (e.g., social skills).

Define child's SM (Initial Hypothesis)
- Based upon preliminary assessment, use subjective data to define verbal behavior in terms of frequency, intensity, stimulus conditions, and social appropriateness.
- Use definition to decide upon specific outcome measures targeting current and future problems (Don't forget to program for generalization).
- Operationalize the definitions of the measurement criteria.

OUTCOMES

Data Collection Planning
- Develop data-collection forms for continuous, direct outcome measures in the child's social settings. Ensure that a conservative number of codes is identified to facilitate easy and efficient data collection.
- Train observers and test operational definitions to increase the likelihood of high observer agreement.

Data Analysis
- After data is gathered from different stimulus situations, decide upon criteria to evaluate hypothesized outcomes (e.g., visual, statistical analysis, etc.).
- Organize raw data in a systematic format to use data to facilitate easy and efficient data collection.
- Systematic Evaluation
  - The child talks when I'm alone with him/her.
  - The child talks during small group activities.
  - The child talks during large group activities.
  - The child talks in mixed social situations.
- Outcome Assessment
  - When home-school note was utilized to reinforce instances of one-word verbal responses, David demonstrated on average of 80% of teacher questions (per teacher report).
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Data Analysis
- Systematic Evaluation
  - The psychologist employed the same clinical procedures with David at a before-school program. Again, fading procedures were utilized and David was highly praised for verbal responses.

Outcome Assessment
- Improving the child's social interaction in the home-school setting may not only contribute to the improvement of classroom performance but may also contribute to the behavioral momentum. David's teacher implemented the same treatment (highly efficient and effective) in the home setting.

Survey Analysis

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DISCUSSION

- This research model a case study in which a systematic method was utilized to effectively provide interventions for a child with Selective Mutism.
- Effective intervention for children with SM requires clear identification of outcome variables, specific interventions, and progress monitoring techniques to evaluate effectiveness.
- To the variability of SM symptoms and progress across individuals, pre-assessment planning is imperative.
- Data collection should consist of a variety of measures to assess direct outcomes.
- To enable an effective linkage of possession to individualized intervention, interventions should be modified based on continuous data.
- Utilization of Multiple Measures
  - Continual use of a variety of measures allows clinicians to:
    - Ensure validity.
    - Assess response generalization and discrimination.
    - Examine specific improvements and areas of concern.
    - Apply program for and promote generalization.
    - Assess for social validation.
    - Qualitatively interview parents and teacher the successes of their efforts.