Study Information for District Administrators to Recruit Classroom Sites

Project Title: Advancing Social-Communication and Play (ASAP): An Intervention Program for Preschoolers with Autism

Project Overview
The overarching goal of this multi-site four-year project lead by the University of North Carolina is to improve social-communication and play skills in children identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) being served in public preschool programs. The specific objective is to examine the efficacy of the Advancing Social-communication And Play (ASAP) intervention in classrooms serving preschool-aged children with autism. Our working hypotheses are that children exposed to the ASAP intervention in comparison to those who continue to receive their usual classroom instruction will (a) make greater improvements in the targeted skills of social-communication and play, and (b) demonstrate improved language skills, as well as more appropriate engagement with objects and peers in the classroom environment. To answer our research questions, 20 classrooms in Miami will comprise our study sample. Each classroom/teacher will only be involved in the study for the duration of one school year.

Research Questions
1. What are the effects of the ASAP intervention on the proximal outcomes of social-communication and play skills of preschool-aged children with ASD?
2. Does ASAP produce effects on the more distal outcomes of increased child engagement with classroom objects and peers, and child language development?
3. Do child-level and/or teacher-level variables moderate the effects of the ASAP intervention?
4. Does fidelity of intervention implementation mediate the effects of ASAP?

Procedures
Sample. Children in this study will be between 3 and 5 years of age at the beginning of the school year. All children will have previous clinical or school diagnoses consistent with DSM IV (APA, 1994) criteria of Autistic Disorder, PDD-NOS, or Asperger’s Syndrome, or show deficits in social-communication and play that are consistent with those found in children with autism spectrum disorders. To be enrolled in the study, children must meet diagnostic criteria on an assessment designed to measure symptoms of autism. Exclusion criteria include known genetic syndromes associated with autism (e.g., fragile X), significant uncorrected vision/hearing/physical impairments, uncontrolled seizure disorder, and/or history of traumatic brain injury that could be associated with secondary causes of autism. Additionally, children who have language skills at a very high level may be excluded from the study since they may be beyond the skills targeted in the ASAP intervention. This will be determined during the initial assessments at the beginning of the school year.
Random assignment. This study uses a design that requires random assignment of classrooms to either the intervention or comparison group. Each classroom has an equal chance of being assigned to the group that will be trained in the ASAP intervention and the group that will continue their usual classroom practices, so all educational teams must be able to accept their group assignment once randomized. Following their participation in the comparison group, classrooms assigned to that condition would receive access to some of the training and intervention materials.

Training: Educational team members (i.e., teachers, teaching assistants, and related service providers) in classrooms using the ASAP intervention will need to participate in a training towards the beginning of the school year (likely occurring in August or early September). The training will last approximately 4 hours. The project will provide the training and needed supplies and materials. Additionally, there will be a 1-2 hour booster training scheduled approximately 1-2 months after this initial training. These trainings may occur during or outside of regular school hours. If the training occurs during regular school hours, the project has set aside money to pay substitute teachers for those classrooms. If the training occurs outside of regular school hours, the educational team members will be compensated $25 per hour for the time spent in the training. We would like the consultation of district administrators to decide if it is more appropriate for trainings to occur during or after normal school hours.

Assessments of child, teacher, and caregiver: All measures that are to be directly administered to the child will be conducted by trained research staff. These measures can be conducted in the child’s classroom or the child can be pulled out, depending upon the teacher’s preference and the child’s comfort. There are 5 different child measures. Two assessments are administered one time each (approximately 45-60 minutes at the beginning or end of the school year) and the other two assessments are administered four times each (approximately 45-75 minutes in total at the beginning, two mid-points, and end of the school year). The final assessment will consist of live observational coding in typical classroom activities and will be collected two times during the school year. Parents will complete a brief demographic questionnaire. Teachers will be asked to complete questionnaires that can be completed at their leisure.

Classroom observations: We will conduct one 2-3 hour classroom observation at the beginning of the school year. In addition, we will videotape 10 minutes of one-to-one instruction between the teacher and two children consented to participate in the study at 3 times during the school year. These videotapes will be used in combination with teacher interviews (approximately 45-60 minutes in length) to assess fidelity of implementation at 3 different points in the school year.

Description of assessments. The measures were selected based on the state of the science in the field of autism and previous experience implementing the ASAP intervention. The ADOS (for social-communication skills) and SPA (for play skills) assessments will be videotaped to ensure they are scored accurately. Obviously, no data will be collected unless we have secured the appropriate consent (e.g. parent, teacher).
Practicality of Research Procedures
Many of the project investigators are former classroom teachers or have spent a lot of time in classrooms, thus we recognize how busy classroom teachers are. Therefore, we will keep data collection and other classroom interruptions to a minimum. We will attempt to do this by collecting data at only 4 time points: the beginning of the school year, two mid-points during the year, and the end of the school year. Further, each classroom/teacher will only be involved in the study for one year. Teachers will be asked to complete questionnaires but are permitted to take the questionnaires home to complete at their leisure. Project staff will administer all direct child assessments to children (e.g., the Mullen) to minimize teacher burden. Depending upon teacher preference, these assessments can be administered in the classroom or the child can be pulled out for a minimal amount of time and assessed in a quiet space.

Incentives for School Personnel
We are truly appreciative of all teachers, teaching assistants, and related service providers who choose to participate in the study. To show our appreciation, classrooms teachers who participate in this study will be provided with $200 - $300 in classroom supplies. The classrooms in the intervention group will receive $200 total and classrooms in the comparison group will receive $300 total ($150 at the beginning and end of the school year). In addition, if one related service provider is participating, they will receive $100 for supplies at the end of the school year. If two related service providers are participating, they will split the $100, so that they will receive $50 each.

District Support
- We are asking for assistance in identifying preschool classrooms serving children with autism willing to participate. Each classroom will participate in the project for one year.
- We also may need the district to provide demographic information on schools only, such as socioeconomic status.
- We will need space to conduct trainings for teachers, teaching assistants, and related service providers involved in ASAP intervention implementation. One of the strengths of our intervention approach is that we train the entire educational team in hopes of fostering collaboration and a team teaching approach. For this study, there will be at least two trainings that take place—first, an introductory training that provides educational teams with general information about the intervention (approximately 4 hours); and second, a follow-up booster training where we bring those same teams back together to brainstorm and resolve any issues that may have arisen around implementation (approximately 1-2 hours). Each of the two trainings may need to occur across two separate days. We do have funds to either pay substitutes to cover school staff time to participate in these trainings during the regular school day, or we can compensate school staff for attending the trainings after normal school hours. With respect to this training, we need administrative level personnel involvement for two purposes: (a) to help us arrange a venue for the trainings at an appropriate location in the school system; and (b) to coordinate with us regarding the preferred training model (i.e., during the regular school day with substitutes provided for the classrooms, or after the regular school day with compensation for the school staff attending).
We will need space in each school building where a classroom is involved in the study to conduct child assessments four times during the school year, and will need the assistance of administrative level personnel (e.g., school principal) to identify an appropriate space.

Contact Information
Thank you for considering your district’s participation in this study. We appreciate you contacting us with any questions and to discuss possible classroom sites. If you are willing to help us after our discussion, we will ask you to pass on study information to appropriate sites so the school administrators and staff can contact us directly.

Sincerely,
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