Previous Research

Existing research suggests that neurotypical individuals who read fiction have higher levels of empathy than those who do not read fiction. A predominant characteristic of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is the inability to understand the perspective of others (Theory of Mind) which also impairs the ability to experience empathy for others.

Research Question

This survey research examined the current reading habits and empathy levels of individuals with ASD to explore the potential of incorporating fiction reading into language interventions to increase Theory of Mind and empathy.

Method

Participants
- 22 individuals with ASD
- 22 neurotypical individuals (NT) age and gender matched

Tasks & Scoring

Transportation Questions
- 9 questions used to analyze transportation’s major elements: emotional involvement in the story, cognitive attention to the story, lack of awareness of surroundings, and mental imagery.
- 5 point scale
- The more transported an individual was, the higher the score would be.

The Author Recognition Test
- Measures a participant’s familiarity with fiction.
- Individuals who consider themselves to be ‘readers’ read often, accumulate knowledge of authors, and experience transportation.
- Test lists 65 real author names and 65 fake names.
- The participant received 1 point for choosing a real name and lost 1 point for choosing a fake name.

Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test
- Measures social cognition, as it relates to the ability to recognize what others are thinking or feeling (e.g., Theory of Mind).
- 36 item test requires you to look at a picture of eyes and then select the word that best describes what the person in the picture is thinking or feeling.

Results

Readers and Nonreaders
- Scores between the ASD group and the NT group, for the Author Recognition Task and the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test were not significantly different.

Readers
- 22 Readers, ASD=13 and Without ASD=11
- Responses to Transportation Questions: both groups experience transportation into fiction in a similar way.
- People with ASD feel stories are more relevant to their everyday lives than individuals without ASD.
- Readers performed better on both the Author Recognition Task and the Theory of Mind Test than individuals who said they were not readers.
- No significant difference in the performance of readers and nonreaders on the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test.

Implications

- People with ASD report experiencing transportation when reading fiction at the same rate as individuals without ASD.
- Fiction reading has the potential to be incorporated into language intervention to help improve theory of mind and empathy.
- Research regarding the efficacy of using fiction reading in language intervention is warranted.

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