Extension of Research on Social Skills Training Using Comic Strip Conversations to Students Without Autism

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Abstract: Comic Strip Conversations is a positive behavioral support strategy that has been used effectively to improve the social skills of students with autism. Research on the effectiveness of this strategy was extended to four students with other mild/moderate learning, cognitive and behavioral disabilities. Two elementary teachers used Comic Strip Conversations for a period of six weeks with four 6-10 year olds who exhibited difficult social behaviors. All participants improved their perceptions of social situations, exhibited appropriate social growth, began to generate their own solutions to difficult social situations, and demonstrated a decrease in target behaviors.

Use of Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations have been shown to be excellent positive behavioral support strategies for students with autism spectrum disorder. A Social Story is a formatted narrative that guides the behavior of a child or adolescent who has difficulty with language expression, especially those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Gray, 1995). Before an event that may be stressful or provoke inappropriate behaviors, a Social Story is written so that the student can experience the situation and “rehearse” positive social behaviors. It can be co-written by an adult and student or, with training, by the student alone. A Comic Strip Conversation is a modification of the Social Story that is centered around pictures rather than text, and is used to review a situation and discuss alternatives to student behavior that was not beneficial. Students work with an adult (usually a teacher or parent) to resolve social dilemmas by drawing what occurred using simple figures and other comic strip symbols such as speech bubbles, discussing the negative outcome, including missed social cues, and planning a different outcome for future interactions (Rogers & Myles, 2001). Research on the effectiveness of Comic Strip Conversations thus far has been limited, but it has been demonstrated as an effective method for improving the social perceptions of students with autism and Asperger’s Syndrome (Glaeser, Pierson, & Fritschman, 2003). The following study extends the current research to include students with other mild/moderate disabilities.

Students with mild/moderate disabilities often lack social skills important to positive peer relationships (Atwood, 2000; Gresham, 1992; Swanson & Malone, 1992; Vaughn, 1992) including “a lack of reciprocity, little appreciation of social cues, and failure to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people” (Atwood, p. 85-86). Gray (1995a,b) designed Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations as interventions for teaching these social skills to children with limited language expression, particularly those with autism. Studies on the use of these interventions with this population have been limited, but encouraging (Glaeser et al., 2003; Rogers & Myles, 2001; Rowe, 1999; Swaggart et al., 1995).

There are few studies on the use of these interventions for children with learning and other mild/moderate disabilities (LD), although it has been proposed. Gut and Safran (2002) proposed that teachers could use Social Stories as part of literature response groups to reduce anxiety and improve the acceptance of students with disabilities into
general education cooperative groups. Use of Social Stories would help a child with LD understand the social cues of others in the group. “Advance information about this type of situation can reduce anxiety and provide alternative coping strategies to deal with such a situation” (p. 90).

Children with learning disabilities exhibit a variety of social skill deficits. A meta-analysis of research indicated that these students were less liked and more likely to be rejected by normal achieving children, and were more likely to be rated as aggressive, immature, suffer personality problems, and have difficulty attending when compared to peers without handicaps (Swanson & Malone, 1992). Some researchers have suggested that social skill deficits are so prevalent in persons with LD, leading to peer relationship problems that can affect graduation and post-school outcomes, that they should be considered a subtype of learning disability (Vaughn, 1992). Gresham (1992), however, rejected this idea because of evidence in the literature that many students with LD function well socially. Gresham concluded that the best explanation drawn from the research is that most children classified as LD have poorer social skills, are more poorly accepted, and more often rejected than students without LD, but these children do not differ from students who have just low achievement (p. 357). He proposes that all social skills interventions, especially for children with LD, should be based on a functional analysis of the child’s environment, e.g., focused on specific, controllable environmental variables that can be manipulated to produce changes in social behavior (p. 359).

Comic Strip Conversations fit this definition of a behavioral intervention based on functional analysis of a student’s environment. The situations displayed in these “stories” are taken directly from the student’s daily life, and therefore relate directly to the student’s social skills in given situations. The “comic strips” are designed to provide students with alternatives for behavior that will quickly and directly affect their peer relationships. Thus, Comic Strip Conversations should be an effective social skill intervention for students with LD, behavior disorders, and mild mental retardation.

Method

Participants

Two teachers in a large suburban school district used Comic Strip Conversations to improve the social skills and/or specific problem behaviors exhibited by four students in multiple settings. Both teachers were special day class teachers, which meant that a high concentration of the social situations occurred in or around self-contained classrooms outside of the general education population.

The teachers were both relatively new to their profession with less than five years of teaching experience who were interested in trying a new strategy to improve the social perceptions, social skills and problem behaviors of their most difficult students. Both teachers were females and were fully credentialed as educational specialists with an emphasis in mild/moderate disabilities.

Each teacher collected anecdotal data on the social skills deficits and problem behaviors of all students (Teacher A, n = 11, Teacher B, n = 10) for one month prior to teaching the specific students how to use Comic Strip Conversations. This helped them to isolate which students had the most severe social skills deficits, which then affected their behaviors. The authors helped the teachers determine which students had the most severe social skill deficits and, therefore, would benefit most significantly from the use of Comic Strip Conversations. Target behaviors included: eliminating explosive temper tantrums, learning to get along with others on the playground by following their rules for games, working cooperatively in classroom centers with a small group, and reducing physical violence toward other students both in the classroom and on the playground.

Four students were identified as having the most severe social skill deficits, which in turn negatively affected their behavior and peer relationships. Consent letters were sent home to inform parents and ask permission for student participation. All four parents/guardians for the identified students agreed to a six-week intervention using Comic Strip Conversations and data collection for this article. One mother expressed concern that the intervention would be intrusive and ineffective.
Teacher A reiterated that she could withdraw her child at any time during the intervention and that if there was no significant improvement after the six weeks, other strategies would then be implemented in place of Comic Strip Conversations. She did then consent to have her child participate fully in the research study. Next, students were told about the intervention and readily agreed to be a part of the study.

Two students had been diagnosed by district criterion as having specific learning disabilities (LD), one student had mild mental retardation (MMR) with an IQ of 68, and one student qualified as emotionally and behaviorally disordered (EBD). Students were between the ages of 6-10 years old at the time of the study. All students received more than 50% of their academic instruction within a special education setting.

Teachers were trained on the use of Comic Strip Conversations by the authors who had experience with the strategy. The professors modeled the strategy, assisted the teachers in determining when a Comic Strip Conversation should be used, and assisted the teachers with the initial implementation.

Target behaviors were defined for each student in order to focus the social skills intervention. These were:

Student 1: Reduce temper tantrums in the classroom and on the playground
Student 2: Increase willingness to follow student-made rules for games on the playground
Student 3: Increase appropriate cooperative behaviors in small group settings in the special education classroom
Student 4: Reduce physical violence toward other students and adults in the classroom and on the playground

Procedure

Guidelines for Comic Strip Conversations written by Glaeser et al. (2003) were followed. Once target behaviors were defined, Comic Strip Conversation books were made for each of the four target students. This consisted of multiple pieces of paper divided into four sections stapled together. The teacher would remove the student from the situation, sit him down in a quiet place, and sit side by side to initiate the drawings.

Students began with a symbol dictionary illustrating the meaning of a specified number of icons to be used to create a miniature story. There were two types of symbol dictionaries used. The Conversation Symbols Dictionary included eight symbols for basic conversations such as listening, interrupting, talking, and thoughts as outlined by Gray (1994). The Personal Symbols Dictionary was an individualized collection of symbols used by the student. Students frequently added to the Personal Symbols Dictionary as new situations arose.

Students were encouraged to write about what happened during a specific incident. The final comic strip/panel was reserved for the solution or positive outcome of the social/behavioral situation. On a daily basis, teachers reminded students of the comic strips that were drawn on previous occasions. This helped reinforce appropriate social behaviors throughout the day.

When addressing the target behavior, the teacher or paraeducator helped the students focus on the one or more of the following questions in their Comic Strip Conversations in response to the target behaviors: (1) Where are you?, (2) Who else is here?, (3) What are you doing?, (4) What happened? What did others do?, (5) What did you say? (6) What did others say?, (7) What did you think when you said that?, and (8) What did others think when they said that/did that? (Gray, 1994). The teacher or paraeducator shared her perspective of the situation with the student, but then allowed the student control of the conversation. Students were given assistance as needed if the question was too difficult and guided to a logical answer.

Teachers and paraeducators consistently observed social behaviors for six consecutive weeks. Each student was given an opportunity to use Comic Strip Conversations on a daily basis during the following time periods: after recess, after cooperative groups (centers), after lunch, and for any other time period where there was a difficult behavior. If a social situation became volatile or if social skill training was needed during these time periods for any of the four target students, the student would be removed from the situation and teachers would then work with the individual student to create a Comic Strip Conversation.
Results

Across gender, age, primary disability, and teacher, qualitative data indicated significant gains in appropriate perceptions of social situations, improvement in social skills overall, the ability to find solutions to difficult social situations using Comic Strip Conversations, and improvement in targeted behaviors.

Overview of Change in Student Behavior

Student 1 – 7 year old white male identified as LD

Whenever a situation arose where this student did not get his first choice, he would immediately begin to tantrum whether he was in the classroom or on the playground. His tantrums consisted of throwing his body on the ground, hitting the ground with his fists, kicking his legs, and screaming at the top of his lungs. On an average day, Student 1 would tantrum eight times in the classroom and four times on the playground. Obviously, this was very disruptive to other students in the classroom. Comic Strip Conversations were introduced to him to help generate other possible solutions to his tantrums and to help him communicate his needs more clearly.

He expressed excitement over being allowed to draw and quickly understood the purposes of Comic Strip Conversations. He was able to “see” that if he did not tantrum, he would be given a reward for good behavior. He began to draw Comic Strip Conversations completely on his own by the third week of implementation and was adept in creating alternative solutions to his tantrums and to help him communicate his needs more clearly.

By the sixth week, he reduced all classroom tantrums by 80%. He also reduced his playground tantrums by 60%. Student 1 continues to use Comic Strip Conversations as one avenue to see other solutions to his tantrums. However, because his tantrums have not been eliminated completely, alternative strategies have been added to assist him in the reduction of this disruptive behavior.

Student 2 – 10 year old white female identified as LD

Student 2 enjoys playing with others on the playground and actively wants to be a part of student-led and student-created games on the playground. Other students on the playground do not mind if she joins them; however, she has begun arguing with the students over the rules of each game. Therefore, she has been shunned from playground games within the first few weeks of school because of her lack of willingness to follow the rules created by the student groups. Student 2 ends up crying throughout recess times because she wants to join the others, but has not shown the capacity to agree with and follow the rules to the games. She then has a difficult time calming down when it is time to return to the classroom. This unwillingness to cooperate with others on the playground was becoming a great distraction to her academics following recess.

Comic Strip Conversations were introduced with the expectation that she would be better able to “see” how her behavior on the playground made her unable to join others in games. During the first week of Comic Strip Conversations, Student 2 seemed apprehensive and was not willing to contribute to the “conversation.” The teacher created each Comic Strip Conversation for the first five days of the intervention.

On the second day of the second week, Student 2 began to add to the Comic Strip Conversations by drawing herself as the one everyone was picking on. The teacher who worked with her on this continued to point out the fact that students created the rules so that the games would be fair and that other students wanted to follow the rules.

By the middle of the third week, Student 2 asked if she could join the group of students again on the playground. She promised that she would follow their rules even though she did not agree with them. The teacher created a Comic Strip Conversation where Student 2 and the students on the playground were discussing the fact that Student 2 would like to rejoin their group. This time she was ready to follow the rules. Although this Comic Strip Conversation was completely teacher-generated, Student 2 practiced with the dialogue so
that she would be prepared to express her understanding of the student-made rules.

At the end of the third week, Student 2 successfully rejoined the games on the playground. Throughout the fourth week, she continued to generate Comic Strip Conversations to describe the interactions on the playground and to adequately “see” what was expected of her when she participated in the games. Only one further Comic Strip Conversation was necessary in the final two weeks of the intervention. This occurred because two new students joined the group during recess and Student 2 had difficulty including them in the game.

Overall, Student 2 improved her perception of the social situation, exhibited appropriate social skills to participate successfully in the playground games on a daily basis, and increased her willingness to follow playground rules by 100%.

*Student 3 – 6 year old Hispanic male identified as MMR*

Students in this special day class were given one hour a day where they rotated to different academic centers with leadership of the teacher or a paraeducator at each center. Student 3 repeatedly refused to work in small groups during center time in the classroom despite which center or educator he was assigned to first. He worked well independently or even in large groups when the desks were separated. He especially enjoyed science and art. However, when he had to sit at a table with three or four other students, he would repeatedly get out of his seat or duck under the table. When asked to stay seated, he would throw his papers around or refuse to participate with the group.

Comic Strip Conversations were introduced to Student 3 with the expectation that he would better “see” the way his behaviors affected others around him and kept him from studying his favorite subjects. He showed interest in this strategy because it removed him from having to participate in a small group and because it involved art. The teacher became concerned that he continued to refuse to work with others during center time so that he would have the opportunity to draw Comic Strip Conversations. Therefore, he was told that each morning, he would create a Comic Strip Conversation on how he would act appropriately during small group time. In addition, the teacher also worked with him on a Comic Strip Conversation at the end of the day as a reward for good behavior during center time.

Student 3 was able to stay seated and work with others in small groups during all subjects after five weeks of Comic Strip Conversations. He continues to keep a Comic Strip Conversation book to work on each morning and afternoon.

*Student 4 – 9 year old white male identified as E/BD*

The reduction of physical violence on the playground and in the classroom was the target behavior for Student 4. This student was considered one of the most dangerous to other students at this school site. Numerous interventions had been tried with some to little success. The decision to add Comic Strip Conversations to the repertoire of Student 4’s behavioral interventions was done with the understanding that other interventions would be continued.

After Comic Strip Conversations were introduced to Student 4, he showed no interest in cooperating with this new strategy. For three weeks, the teacher continued to work with him on creating Comic Strip Conversations to help him understand what others might be thinking when he attacked them. He became more interested in the strategy, but still did not want to draw them himself. He began to add to the dialogue and assist the teacher in creating the thoughts of others by the end of the third week.

By the end of the fifth week, Student 4 began to draw one out of four pictures in the Comic Strip Conversations. He was also creating all of the dialogue, but still wanted the teacher to draw 75% of the pictures for each situation. The teachers and researchers agreed that this was acceptable because his behavior was slowly improving. Student 4 continues to use Comic Strip Conversations as part of his daily routine. He has reduced his physical violence by 50%.
Overview of Results

Both teachers specifically looked for improvement in the following areas: (1) appropriate perceptions of social situations, (2) social skills growth, (3) student generation of solutions to difficult social situations, and (4) a decrease in problem behaviors (specifically the target behavior).

Problem behaviors decreased overall although two students (Students 1 and 4) continued to have difficulty controlling themselves on the playground.

Discussion

Overall, significant improvements in social skill perceptions using Comic Strip Conversations for students with mild/moderate disabilities at the primary level were found. All four target students were better able to generate solutions to social situations after using Comic Strip Conversations than before they were introduced to the strategy. Students with severe problem behaviors still needed additional strategies and resources to improve their difficult behaviors, but Comic Strip Conversations was one avenue to assist these students in having better self-perceptions about their behavior in a social situation. Current research points to the effectiveness of realistic social perceptions in the improvement of problem behaviors. Therefore, Comic Strip Conversations is an effective first step in improving problem behaviors for students with mild/moderate disabilities.

One limitation of this research was that there were only four students who were targeted for intervention using Comic Strip Conversations. Future research should focus not only on more participants, but also on students with social skill deficits from a variety of general and special education settings.

References


