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Introduction: Communication assessment in children with minimal verbal skills is difficult, and a diversified approach using a combination of standardized measures, experimental measures, and language samples is needed (Kasari et al. 2013). We have been validating a scale to be used in scoring communication complexity from a scripted interaction protocol that is showing great promise as an outcome measure (Brady et al. 2012, Brady et al. accepted). We have also been working to apply the scale to communicative behaviors observed in naturally occurring contexts to reduce the assessment burden as recommended by Kasari et al 2013. In addition to limiting the burden for both the child and the test administrator, assessment of communication with familiar partners in authentic contexts has the advantage of being the most representative of everyday communication abilities. In this analysis, we address differences in the complexity of communication based on assessment setting.

Method: Twenty (18 boys, 2 girls) elementary-aged children with minimal verbal skills and autism were observed in a variety of naturalistic contexts within their schools. Child communication behavior was coded from 10-minute observations within each context using a time-sampling procedure. Additionally, each child completed a scripted assessment with 12 activities administered by a researcher and coded from video. The Communication Complexity Scale (Brady et al. 2012) was used to assign complexity scores to the most complex communication act observed during each interval for the naturalistic contexts and each activity within the scripted assessment. The naturalistic contexts were grouped into the following setting categories: structured group settings, unstructured group settings, and structured one-on-one settings.

Results: The scripted interaction complexity scores were typically higher than or as high as the scores in natural contexts. For some children, scripted interaction scores were even higher than scores in one-on-one contexts with their teachers. Scores were typically lowest in unstructured settings, especially with peers.

Discussion: The results support the recommendation to use a diversified approach when assessing the communication skills of children with minimal verbal skills. The relatively high scripted interaction scores suggest that the scripted interaction protocol is working as intended in eliciting communication in a manner that encourages the highest form. Differences across contexts may reflect differences in expectations and support for communication in different classroom contexts.

References/Citations: