

Bridging the gap

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IMPACT

Relevance for the target group

Years ago, as a research master student educated in a highly scientific world entering the world of mental health care, I was surprised, intrigued and inspired by the gap between science and clinical practice. When I started to initiate this dissertation project, I hoped and aspired to contribute to bridging the gap between science and clinical practice regarding youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). All research questions in this dissertation were generated by working with children and adolescents with ASD in specialized mental health care. The ultimate goal of this dissertation would be to reach out to youngsters with ASD, their caregivers, and relevant health care providers. To help them better understand what an individual youngster with ASD desires regarding social interaction in a certain phase of life; to develop an effective training program to improve the social skills of children with ASD; and to support the detection of children and adolescents at risk for ASD. Obviously, there is still a way to go to eventually reach these goals, both scientifically speaking and in terms of reaching this target group. However, clinicians can play an important role. They can do this by being aware of the debate regarding desire for social interaction and the risk of loneliness; and be curious and interested in every youngster with ASD to explore and discuss this with them and/or their parents. Both researchers and clinicians can have access to the chapters of this dissertation through the publications in peer-reviewed international journals. In addition, it is important that clinicians provide evidence-based group social skills training to children with ASD in order to improve their social skills. In fact, the protocol for the group social skills training for children with ASD from Chapter 3 is published in a well-known series of Dutch books with standardized treatments for children and adolescents with psychological complaints (Braet & Bögels, 2013; Braet & Bögels, 2020). These books are often used in clinical practice and in education programs for clinicians. Our group SST is thus well available in The Netherlands and can be easily applied in clinical practice.

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Scientific relevance

One important aim of this dissertation was to increase awareness for the desire for social interaction in youths with ASD. Fortunately, in more recent years, this subject receives more and more attention in the scientific world. The importance has been recognized, and the debate is quite alive (Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019). This dissertation adds to the field in a few ways. It is difficult to define, measure, and objectify the desire for social interaction, especially in children with ASD. In this dissertation, attempts were made to assess desire for social interaction in children and adolescents with ASD. Of course, the methods used need further psychometric evaluation and the results need replication. However, this dissertation does contribute to the field by providing new instruments to assess the desire for social interaction which hopefully inspires other researchers. In addition, the results obtained are relevant and provide input for discussion and future research (see Summary and General Discussion). In Chapter 1, it was demonstrated that on an explicit level, children with ASD expressed less desire for social interaction as compared to typical children. However, on the implicit assessment they showed a stronger approach tendency towards a social stimulus than the typically developing children. These findings suggest a discrepancy between the desire for

social interaction on the less conscious level as compared to their explicitly expressed desire for social interaction. In Chapter 2, both children and adolescents with ASD showed less explicit desire for social interaction compared to typically developing and clinical control youths. Within the ASD group, the adolescents showed a stronger explicit desire for social interaction than the children. The results of Chapter 2 might explain previous inconsistencies with regard to levels of loneliness in youngsters with ASD. That is, the higher levels of loneliness in the ASD group as compared to the control groups were completely attributable to the adolescent subgroup.

In line with recent meta-analyses (Gates, Kang, & Lerner, 2017; Wolstencroft, Robinson, Srinivasan, Kerry, Mandy, & Skuse, 2018), the study in Chapter 3 demonstrated that the social skills of children with ASD can be improved by a group social skills intervention. In addition to many other studies reviewed, our study did explore the generalizability of the social skills to the natural environment of the children and also found that this generalization was successful. Both parents and teachers observed improvement in social skills directly after the group SST and at follow-up of 3 months as compared to pre-assessment.

In Chapter 4 the screening potential for ASD of the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA; original version: Achenbach, 1991; revised version: Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) was explored. As the ASEBA system is already often used to screen for various forms of psychopathology. It would be very useful and efficient to be able to add a special ASD subscale to screen for ASD that reliably detects children and adolescents at risk for ASD. Our study contributed to the existing research by comparing several hypothesized screening variants. It was confirmed that, especially the parent version of, the ASEBA can be used to screen for ASD. The special ASD scales developed by Ooi and colleagues (2011) and So and colleagues (2012) clearly had the best screening potential and deserve further research.

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