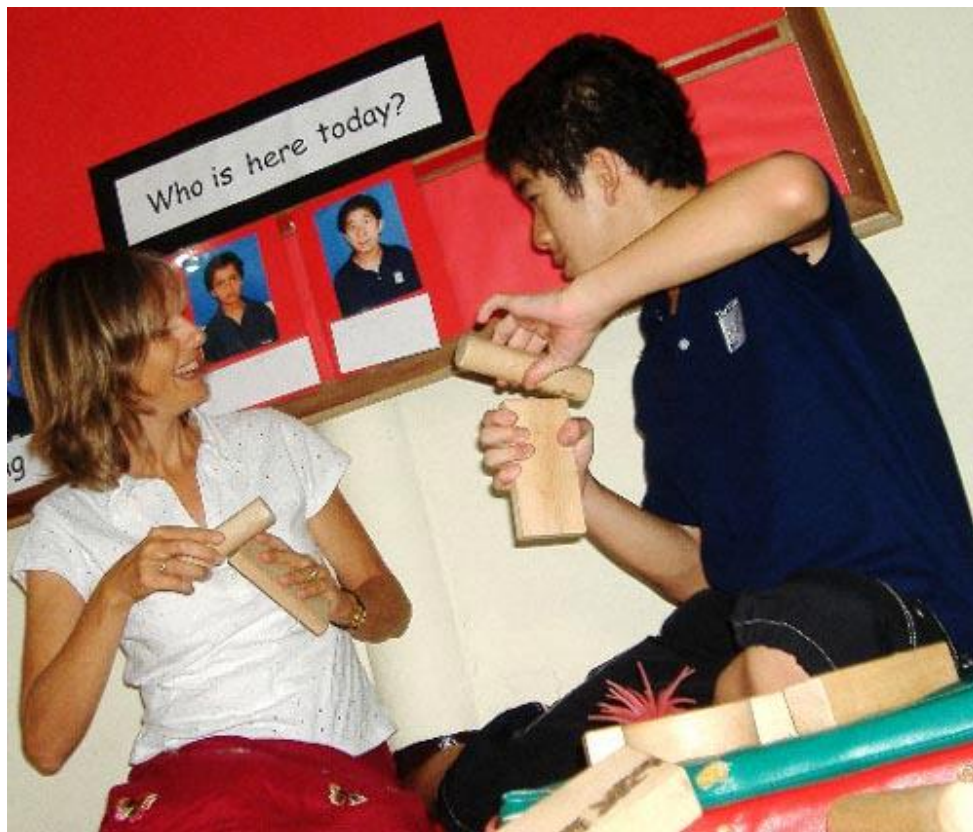


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Intensive interaction in action

UK educator in Bangkok pioneers new method to help autistic children develop their communication skills

LEARNING POST



When asked, "What do you understand about autism?" many of us will think of individuals with phenomenal skills in areas like music, maths or memory, but who can't communicate with other people or do the simplest of tasks. We might describe their bizarre behaviour, obsessions and rituals, and mention Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of an adult with autism in the film *Rainman*. This fictional character could instantly memorise facts and complex number sequences, and yet was unable to make eye contact with his brother and was terrified of new situations. Mozart and Albert Einstein have been described as having this condition.

While such autistic savants do exist, they are rare and many children with autism have

severe and profound learning difficulties. These young people may become locked into obsessional behaviour, such as constant rocking, waving their hands or using other bizarre repetitive movements. These can have the effect of "blocking out" other people, and preventing us from helping them to develop basic communication skills. These skills, such as eye contact, accepting and giving touch, and taking turns when we talk, are learned by babies before they reach one year of age. Parents naturally teach these skills, without realising it, when they play games, such as Peek-a-Boo.

Educators in the UK have looked closely at how parents help their babies learn vital early communication skills, and have applied this knowledge to their work with people with autism and severe learning difficulties. This has led to a new approach, known as Intensive Interaction. An adult sits with the autistic child and copies his movements, sounds and play, much as a mother would do with her baby.

Michael Jones, a UK educational consultant specialising in working with children with communication difficulties, has introduced Intensive Interaction to children with autism at the Village International Education Centre (Village International), in the Ekamai area, and has achieved some spectacular results.

"The secret is not to tell the child what to do", explains Jones. "You move quietly next to him and gradually copy what he does. If he bangs two bricks together, you do the same. If he starts rocking, you rock too. If he makes a noise, you copy him. Gradually he will take notice of you. Because you are doing something that makes perfect sense to him, he can relax, and you can find yourself being allowed into his world; often for the first time."

These sessions are usually spontaneous, and can happen anywhere. Jones uses every opportunity to engage the children. "I find that fun times are often the best, when the children are focused on activities that they enjoy, or when they are on their own, locked into their repetitive behaviours. A session can last 15 minutes or 30 seconds, depending on the child's mood and receptiveness. The key is that we respond to him and are not tempted to interpret what he is doing and start talking," says Jones.

Jones understands that this technique is radically different to other approaches that adults use with children with autism, and recognises that it can take some time to get used to. Adults who are able to be quiet and follow the child's lead can achieve quite dramatic results. One teacher at Village International was clearly moved after a 15-minute session with a teenager with autism, severe learning difficulties and little understanding of language. "I felt for the first time that he wanted to make real contact with me. He was banging wooden blocks together in a repetitive way. I sat down quietly next to him, and he was intrigued that I was copying him. It reminded me of dancing, where you get in tune with your partner, without saying anything. After 10 minutes he moved away from me. I stayed where I was, but to my surprise he came back and sat next to me. For the first time, this young man looked me in the eye. It was a magical moment."

Adults are quite naturally concerned that by copying children's often bizarre behaviour they will only make these behaviours more pronounced. Jones sympathises with this view.

"Regular sessions can actually change the way a person behaves, and I have seen worrying behaviours like rocking reduce, and in some cases be replaced by something more socially acceptable."

But how does this work, and what is happening within the child? Jones explains: "In some cases the world makes very little sense to the person with autism. Their repetitive behaviours can be the only things that they really understand, and may be enormously comforting. They can find language very confusing, and in some cases very frightening, so they use these bizarre behaviours to block us out. By copying them, we are sharing communication at a very basic level, in the same way that mothers do with their babies. As their understanding of communication develops, they no longer need to use repetitive behaviours to keep us away. As a result they become more confident and trusting and can begin to develop relationships."

Harshi Sehmar, director of Village International, invited Jones over from the UK. "Jones's work with the students and advice to adults has had a major impact at Village International. I have seen quite extraordinary changes in students who are normally very passive and unresponsive," Sehmar said. "We have been surprised and delighted at the way that this powerful technique is helping to unlock their potential to communicate, and the way that they are allowing us into their world."

"Along with the other learning approaches that we use, regular use of Intensive Interaction could lead to our youngsters developing more understanding of other people. Without this vital foundation they can't move on to the next stages, such as using sign language or speech to communicate."

To find out more about Jones's work, visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk , or email michaeljones@talk4meaning.co.uk

For information about The Village International Education Centre visit www.village-education.com .

Michael Jones will be returning to Bangkok in February, and is particularly interested to meet parents of children with learning difficulties and communication needs.

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