

Strength-Based Approach to Support Children with ASD

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Abstract: Because of the influence of traditional deficit mode, most people only view autism spectrum disorder from the perspective of defects. In practice, it also focuses on dealing with defects, such as poor performance, social emotional difficulties and so on. The long-term focus on defects will lead to negative labels, which have limited effect on solving the growing plight of ASD children. This thesis compares how to treat ASD from the traditional deficit perspective and the Strength-based perspective, and discusses the theoretical basis of the strength-based approach to demonstrates the rationality of the strength-based approach, and analyzes the Chinese background. Hope to guide more attention to the strengths of ASD children in future practice.

1. Introduction

Parents, medical experts, educators and the public often have negative views to autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The most obvious reason is the most common definition is the deficit pattern. In other words, we tend to view autism only in terms of defects, such as repetitive behaviors, the severe limitation of social skills, the inability to easily interact with others, the inability to attract, develop and maintain friendship, the challenge of understanding social language, the lack of eye gaze, abnormal responses to sensory stimuli. The definition in DSM also naturally focuses entirely on defects, excluding strengths. Historically, Psychologists have been devoted to the research of psychopathology, ignoring the factors that can improve learning, cognition or social function (Winter-Messiers et al., 2007).

Parents often only ask for counseling when children have problems, which reinforces the concept of remedy. Unfortunately, the focus on strengthening positive behaviors or cultivating positive qualities of problem children is far from enough. Meanwhile, many practices to determine the needs of children with ASD are based on the defect model, which focuses on dealing with defects, poor grades and social emotional difficulties and so on. Rashid and Ostermann (2009) believe that focusing only on the difficulties of clients will lead to negative label forms. Clients are regarded as defects by others, and they also begin to see themselves as defects. The researchers believe that this may also lead to an asymmetry in the balance of power between expert professionals and clients waiting for diagnosis.

2. Traditional View of Characteristics of Children with Asd

Emotional defect refers not only to the cognition of others' emotions, but also to the ability of

individuals to express their emotions. This happens when people with ASD cannot understand facial or verbal expressions and body language and interpret them as meaning different or opposite to the other person's intention. One of the destructive consequences of this defect is inferiority. This makes them vulnerable, too critical, use negative words and see themselves as losers, which can lead to extreme anxiety and depression (Winter-Messiers et al., 2007).

There are many difficulties in communication. These usually include choosing the right topic, knowing the right time to start talking about a new topic, knowing how to ask a question, understanding the correct usage of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation; explaining abstract language, etc. (Gillberg, 2002). Third is sensory deficit. It may be one of the most complex factors of ASD is the low or high response range sensitive to vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, vestibule and proprioception (Kern et al., 2006). The executive function deficit means that children or adolescents with ASD have difficulties in information processing or organization, unable to focus on a specific activity (Killiany et al., 2005). Final is behavioral deficit. ASD children often have restricted and repetitive behaviors or language, adhere to the same behavior pattern, and even become very painful when encountering small changes. At the same time, they have very limited and fixed interests.

3. Theoretical Basis of Strength-Based Approach

Positive psychology pays close attention to the individual's unique positive characteristics and maximizes its potential. It emphasizes the personal happiness and sensory pleasure, and help clients build a positive understanding through the development of caring ability, courage, forgiveness, perseverance, creativity, future consciousness and optimism. Positive psychological assessments may be more interested in individual internal strengths, such as personality advantages and virtue (Seligman et al., 2005).

Strengths perspective thinks that everyone has their own power and resources to solve problems, and has the resistance to survive in difficult environment. Even the individuals who are oppressed and tortured in a dilemma have the inherent potential advantages they never knew. The strengths perspective focuses on exploring the advantages of people, helping them to understand its advantages, so as to solve the external or potential problems. The theoretical basis of strengths perspective is from negative pessimism to positive and optimistic view of human nature, from problem defect to advantage power. Try to apply the strengths perspective to ASD children, which is completely opposite to the previous problem perspective. It will produce the gratifying effect, because children are no longer just sick children. It can be seen that this is only part of their characteristics, but not all. To serve them with this kind of understanding, so that the initiative can return to children and families. To explore children's resources and potential will certainly promote the development of children to a greater extent.

Resiliency theory provides many foundations for early strength-based approaches for children and adolescents (Jimerson et al., 2004). Resiliency is the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threat, and even major stress sources. Henderson and Milstein (1996) broadly define resiliency as a capability to recover, rebound, successfully adapt to adversity and develop social, academic and professional capabilities even in the face of severe pressures. The ways to stay resilient include positive attitude. People need to actively acknowledge and accept their environment, including adaptability. Another way is having a support system to stay resilient. Resilient people think positively about themselves.

Community psychology has always focused on empowerment, prevention, and committed to building the strengths of individuals and communities, respecting individual rights (Levine & Perkins, 2004). One of the social values of social psychology is to trust and increase the ability of

service objects.

4. Definition of Strength-Based Approach

Identifying strong interests and variables beneficial to children with ASD, recognizing the importance of various backgrounds, personal advantages and abilities to people's lives, and paying attention to solutions. By guiding intervention, reshaping children's characteristics and focusing on the positive aspects of behavior, children's growth results can be affected (Cosden et al., 2006). Strength-based method is designed around children's strengths and interests, which will encourage children to explore actively, and provide them with a variety of choices to use their own power. By emphasizing the abilities and strengths of ASD children, we can avoid using the language that seeing ASD as a defect that needs to be corrected.

5. Strength-Based View of Asd Children

First, ASD children have social strength. Taking common interests as activities can be used as a bridge for ASD children's social interaction. In the study, many ASD children seemed cautious or restrained in speaking before being asked about their interests. The tone of the conversation changed as the topic shifted to their particular interests. When they are encouraged to explain their interests or strengths in detail, they become more active and enthusiastic. In order to express their interests, they use more appropriate oral and body language, and improve their communication skills. It can be seen that children with ASD show a certain degree of social maturity when they talk about their interests with others (Winter-Messiers et al., 2007).

They also have communication strength. When engaged in special interest areas, children and adolescents with ASD can communicate effectively, use fluent language, complex vocabulary and good conversational skills. In conversation, the children's language is improved, because they start to talk about their own special interest areas from the topics, they are not very interested in. These children's body language has a series of improvements, from repetitive action habits without obvious communicative intention to more direct eye gaze, more use of suitable gestures to emphasize speaking, body facing other people, and less fidgety movements (Winter-Messiers et al., 2007).

Social strength and communication strength can help ASD children obtain friendship to a great extent, which is a kind of relationship strength. As mentioned above, peers are often reluctant to make friends with ASD children, but in their strengths or areas of interest, they will overcome the deficits mentioned above. When they are more active and use more suitable and more fluent social language or body language, they can develop more friendship. Many children with ASD report that important people, such as parents, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers and professional staff, provide them with great support through public first-hand information or in professional meetings. Studies have shown that the relationship between people with disabilities (including ASD patients) and those who support them may be the key factor for successful treatment, intervention or education. In a survey by Robledo & Donnellan (2016), autistic children described the importance of friendship between them and the people who support them. Some people found something in friendships that they couldn't find in other relationships, while others described how strong the signals of love and emotion were from the people they supported. These relationship strengths are very important to autistic children.

Next is the emotion strength. Children with ASD can show strong positive emotions and attitude when talking about interests. Attwood (2003) described some ASD children's extraordinary ability of emotional communication in music creation and performance. Schneider (1999) is an adult with high functioning autism. He can find his sympathy for the characters through opera. There are also

many examples. For ASD children who like horses, her love of horses helps overcome difficulties and reduce stress. For ASD children who like Disney, Disney can make them feel love and the happiest hope.

Forth, there is sensory processing strength. Specifically, a strong interest in an event or topic seems to relieve ASD children's sensory stress in certain environment. For example, someone's special interest in aircrafts can help him overcome the smell sensitivity.

Similarly, they also have fine-motor strength. Although dysgraphia hinders most children's learning, when it comes to areas of interest, such as painting, sculpture, cartoons, making airplane models, making objects with Lego, and playing musical instruments, these activities usually require extraordinary fine-motor skills. And their enthusiasm encouraged them to stick to difficult fine-motor activities (Winter-Messiers et al., 2007).

Compared with normal children, children with ASD can process a large amount of perceptual information. They usually have extraordinary memories. Most normal children can't remember what they read a few days ago, for some children with ASD, it's an effortless task. In addition, from a very young age, ASD children may be interested in certain information and structure, such as numbers, mechanisms and geometric figures, which are the basis of scientific thinking. Then the research also found that most autistic patients are superior to other individuals in visual structure detection, psychological operation of complex three-dimensional shapes and auditory tasks, such as pitch discrimination.

6. The Reason of Use Strength-Based Approach

The perspective of traditional psychology focusing on problems or defects, and many practical fields concentrate on determining the causes of problems encountered by children and their families. If we pay close attention to pathology and focus on the factors leading to negative aspects rather than the preventive and protective pathological factors, we may not be able to provide a complete understanding of human function. Lack of necessary knowledge to teach children, parents and teachers to maximize their potential. When we focus on negative factors, the abilities of young people and families may be underestimated. It also means that vital resources are less likely to be used when more attention is paid to negative factors. Expanding the strengths of individuals rather than focusing on repairing their weaknesses may lead to more effective treatment. In the review of several parenting programs, it was found that the most effective parenting programs related to parenting ability and reducing the risk of child abuse were based on strength.

Proponents of the strength-based approach argue that unique information can be collected by looking more closely at the strengths of people, which will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of clients (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). This process conveys to clients that their competence is being valued, which helps them form a positive sense of identity, and clients are more likely to experience the interaction. This alone may lead to a higher level of participation, and the discussion of advantages sets a positive and hopeful atmosphere. At the same time, it can enhance their happiness.

Researchers find that active, targeted participation in interest activities can help individuals feel more confident, competent and relevant to others, help children build a positive sense of identity, alleviate anxiety caused by daily activities, and provide a platform for positive interaction with peers and others, promote their participation in family activities and community groups. When they have enough motivation, they are more likely to experience interaction.

Research have shown that by integrating interests into games or taking areas of interest as the theme of social games, social interaction between ASD children and their typical developing peers is improved, which can increase common attention (Kryzak & Jones, 2015) and social behavior

towards peers (Koegel et al., 2012). The study also shows that focusing on the interests is a positive and peaceful experience, and the use of special interests plays a role in reducing the anxiety of ASD patients. This benefit is particularly important for people with ASD (Kaboski et al., 2014).

7. Limitation

There is still a long way to develop SBA, and it is not easy to overcome the long-term influence of deficits perspective. In practice, it is difficult to define the concept of strength. Almost everything can be regarded as an advantage under certain conditions, so it is still very difficult to clearly define people's advantages. Everyone has his own thoughts and ideas on advantages, and advantages will change according to different time and places. Therefore, in the face of the diversity and complexity of advantages, we need to constantly think and discuss (Liu, 2017).

There is a lack of empirical evaluation. There is little empirical evidence to show the extent to which practitioners use their strengths in practice. The evaluation from the perspective of advantages not only needs to evaluate the advantages, but also needs to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention. However, advantages and the effect of receiving help are both variables that are difficult to be manipulated. There are also differences in the degree of mining advantages. Sometimes the display of advantages also includes the level of self-internalization, which is difficult to measure. It is recognized that there are few empirical data available to test existing strength-oriented measures for youth development.

Full emphasis on strengths may make clients cheat themselves, and it is difficult to have a clear understanding of themselves. Therefore, in the process of contacting with society or others, the original problems or defects may be amplified, and this kind of social conflict may cause cognitive conflict and secondary harm to them.

If the strengths perspective overemphasizes the advantage, it will ignore the real problems and difficulties of the case owner (Liu, 2017), we should think the advantage perspective calmly, objectively and rationally, so as to better integrate with the actual situation of China and consider the cultural factors at the same time. We cannot directly copy the foreign model without thinking.

8. Background Information in Mainland China

I found that the research on the strength-based intervention of children with ASD is very limited in mainland China. I searched the CNKI and VIP for “ASD, strength”, and only a few articles talked about the intervention of autistic children from the advantage perspective of social work. I can hardly find any literature describing the development situation of strength-based approach for ASD children in China. At the same time, the second national sample survey of the disabled clearly in China listed autism as a mental disability, which is completely based on the problem perspective. It can be seen that the theoretical research and practical research on this area are weak in China.

However, there are still some practices or programs that may have elements of strength-based practice. In the research on the educational intervention and practical exploration of ASD children, it is mentioned that the education of ASD children should make full use of the advantages and other resources. According to the existing research and conclusions in China, mainstream school teachers pay attention to their skills, abilities and advantages when educating autistic children, which has a positive impact on the growth and development of autistic children to a certain extent. From the perspective of ability, we can stimulate people's ability and advantages, so as to get better development and promote the good trend of society. It is important to correct people's irrational beliefs and create a benign and tolerant environment. At the same time, the domestic literature has discussed the advanced nature of applying strengths perspective to the social work practice of the disabled. First, the strengths perspective emphasizes the attention to the advantages of the disabled

and the respect for the disabled, which will construct a society conducive to the development of the disabled. Second, the strengths perspective helps the disabled to have optimistic expectations and prospects, and stimulates their confidence in struggling in difficulties. Third, the clients and trainers are equal in the potential perspective. And in China, the research on strengths perspective is more focused on application research, and involves a wide range of application fields. Among them, school social work, children's and youth's social work and disabled's social work are the hot areas of scholars' research. The comparison of deficits perspective and strengths perspective in social work is also concerned by some researchers.

9. Conclusion

The biggest obstacle to helping ASD children is that under the influence of long-term problem perspective, it is difficult for both teachers and parents to recognize ASD children from the perspective of advantages. Therefore, when planning intervention program, the most important thing is to help children realize their advantages. Specifically, exploring the interests and strengths of children with ASD, helping ASD children become more confident, improving students' communication skills with peers and build relationship and so on. The intervention should emphasize the children's social advantages, communication advantages to emotional advantages, to help children realize their strength.

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