

A STUDY OF SELECTIVE ATTENTION IN YOUNG AUTISTIC SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

Pertinence level of the information in the unattended channel is supposed to play an important role in the process of selective attention in normal subjects (Norman, 1968). The developmental disorder of autism has been found to affect different measures of attention, but the attributes of the information to be ignored have not been investigated. This study examines the effect of information pertinence in the distracting auditory channel on primary task performance in young autistic subjects as compared to normal controls. A dichotic listening procedure and a bimodal selective attention task were implemented. It was found that, although the autistic group performed as fast as control groups, it made more errors on the dichotic listening task even when matched on receptive language abilities. Post-hoc comparisons showed that the autism group had increased error rates with all verbal distractors. All groups were slowest and made the most errors when the irrelevant channel presentation was the participants' name or a negatively, emotionally charged word. The first one or two presentations of these stimuli seemed to attract the most attention. It was concluded that even though children with autism appear to orient to the same types of stimuli as control groups, they are at a disadvantage when processing verbal stimuli in general.