

Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Dr Avril V Brereton

There is no one-size-fits-all intervention or treatment for children with ASD. The goal is to maximize your child's ability and skills by supporting their development and learning.

Treatment options

A diagnosis of ASD brings a multitude of questions about what to do next. You'll need to make important decisions about your child's education and treatment. Because we do not know the cause for ASD, there is no specific treatment that can cure it. Given our current state of knowledge, there is not only one way to help/teach a child with ASD¹.



Treatment should begin as early as possible and be tailored to the child's unique strengths and needs. A variety of evidence based treatments is more likely to promote development, improve behaviour and reduce stress experienced by the child and family. Three common treatment approaches are outlined below. More information can be found at: Raising Children Network:

http://raisingchildren.net.au/children_with_autism/children_with_autism_landing.html

Educational therapies.

Children with ASD often respond well to highly structured educational programs. Successful programs include parents and professionals working together to improve social skills, communication and behaviour in daily activities. Preschool children who receive individualized behavioural interventions can make good progress.

Behaviour and communication therapies.

Many programs address the range of social, language and behavioural difficulties associated with ASD. Some programs focus on reducing problem behaviours and teaching new skills. Others focus on teaching children how to act in social situations or how to communicate better with others.

Family therapies. Parents and other family members can learn how to understand how ASD affects their child and also learn how to play and interact with their children in ways that promote social interaction skills, manage problem behaviours, and teach daily living skills and communication.

How can I tell whether a suggested treatment is worthwhile?

This question is often asked by parents/carers of young children with ASD and also by those professionals who work with them.

Parents and professionals need to make informed decisions about treatment options for children but it can be difficult to work out whether a treatment that is being considered for a particular child is known to be effective.

Ask questions and think critically about ASD treatments².

- Will the treatment result in harm to my child? (physical or psychological harm)
- Is the treatment developmentally appropriate for my child?
- How will failure of the treatment affect my child and family?
- Has the treatment been validated scientifically?
- How will the treatment be integrated in to my child's current program?

When you are planning what your child's intervention will be, ask the people providing ASD programs questions such as:

- How successful has the program been for other children?
- How many children have gone on to regular school and how have progressed?
- Do staff members have training and experience in working with children with ASD?
- How are activities planned and organized?
- Are there predictable daily schedules and routines?
- How much individual attention will my child receive?
- How is progress measured?
- Will my child be given tasks and rewards that are personally motivating?
- What is the cost, time commitment, and location of the program?

Some points to remember about treatment:

- Beware of treatments that promise “cure”.
- Beware of treatments that are said to work for all children with ASD.
- Detailed assessments and behaviour, language, cognitive and social skills baselines must be completed before any treatment programme can begin so that change can be documented and measured.
- Intervention must be sensitive to the development level and skills of each child with ASD if it is to be effective.

References

1. Francis, K. (2005). Autism interventions: a critical update. *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*, 47: 493-499
2. Freeman, B. (1997). Guidelines for Evaluating Intervention Programs for Children With Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 27, 641-651
3. Raising Children Network:
http://raisingchildren.net.au/children_with_autism/children_with_autism_landing.html