



Early Autism Intervention What Works, Why it Matters

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Early intervention is crucial for young children with autism. This module explores the different approaches to intervention, highlighting the importance of blending developmental and behavioral strategies, and framing all support through a neurodivergent-affirming lens. It also covers the role of goal setting in ensuring meaningful progress.

INTRODUCTION TO EARLY AUTISM INTERVENTIONS

Early interventions are services provided to children typically under the age of five. They should be shaped by the neurodiversity movement, which views some developmental differences as natural human variations rather than something to be fixed. A neurodivergent-affirming approach to intervention shifts the focus from "fixing" traits to supporting a person's quality of life. It acknowledges that challenges often come from a mismatch between a person's traits and their environment.

DEVELOPMENTAL VS. BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES

Early interventions have traditionally fallen into two categories: behavioral and developmental.

- Behavioral approaches (often referred to as ABA) are more adult-led. They break down complex behaviors into smaller parts, teach them step-by-step, and rely on data to measure observable progress.
- Developmental approaches are typically child-led and teach skills in natural contexts like home or school. They focus on "pivotal" skills, such as language and social engagement, by emphasizing a child's initiations and through adult's responsive interactions.

Many modern interventions, such as Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs), blend these two approaches to create more effective intervention packages.

EVIDENCE-BASE FOR EARLY INTERVENTIONS

There is no single "best" intervention for every child. Research shows that behavioral, developmental, and NDBI interventions all have evidence of effectiveness. However, different approaches may support different skills. One key takeaway from recent studies is that high-quality, intensive intervention supports progress, regardless of the approach. It is important to take into account which approach is a good fit for the individual child and family.

UNDERSTANDING GOAL SETTING IN AUTISM INTERVENTIONS

Goal setting provides a roadmap for skill development. Well-defined goals ensure interventions are purposeful, measurable, and tailored to a child's unique needs. It's important to prioritize goals that will have the biggest impact on a child's well-being, such as safety, communication, adaptive skills, and positive peer interactions.

DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN FOR INTERVENTION

An action plan outlines how to achieve a set goal. This may involve teaching skills directly or building foundational skills first. An important element is shared control between the child and the adult. This means allowing the child autonomy to choose activities they enjoy while the adult provides guidance and teaching opportunities.

SHORT-TERM VS. LONG-TERM GOALS

Short-term goals are specific, achievable targets that help track progress toward a broader milestone. They are typically focused on what can be achieved within weeks. Long-term goals provide direction for the entire intervention program and are often set with a 12-week benchmark. They ensure continuous progress and a clear framework for adjusting strategies as needed.

MEASURING PROGRESS

Progress can be made in every session, even in small increments. While common benchmarks like 80% accuracy are used, there is limited evidence to support this as a magical threshold for long-term success. It's more important to use meaningful measures that align with the child's specific goal and learning style.

WHAT WE DO AND DON'T KNOW

What we know:

- Early intervention improves outcomes
- Developmental, behavioral, and NDBI approaches can all be effective
- No single intervention works for every child

What we don't know:

- Which intervention styles are best for particular children or goals
- The optimal balance between parent-coaching and therapist-delivered intervention
- How much intervention is enough

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Early intervention is an important part of supporting young children with autism. By understanding different intervention approaches, setting meaningful goals, and embracing a neurodivergent-affirming lens, providers can create a roadmap that helps children learn and grow in ways that honor their unique strengths and support their quality of life.