

Issues and Recent Advancements in the Behavioural Treatment of Autism: *Practical Strategies for Changing Behaviour at Home and School*

ABAI 2008 Autism Conference

February 8–10 2008

Atlanta, Georgia

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The ABAI's 2008 Autism Conference provided researchers, clinicians, parents, and educators the opportunity to come together and share research-based information and strategies to improve the lives of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Some major conference themes included understanding evidence-based practice, implementing comprehensive and effective treatment for adults and school-aged individuals with ASD, and the importance of tailoring treatments to each learner.

The importance of evidence-based interventions was a central theme throughout the conference. Dr. Mary-Beth Walsh, parent advocate, spoke of the need for parents to play an active role in their child's intervention. She also emphasized the need for both parents and professionals to work together to provide the most effective programming for children. Dr. Walsh stressed the importance of knowing how to evaluate the evidence-base behind current treatments and emphasized the need for parents and professionals to work together to understand the research criteria. This issue is of particular importance given the large number of interventions claiming effectiveness for use with individuals with ASD.

Dr. Gina Green outlined the criteria for determining whether an intervention fits into the category of "evidence-based". Treatments are considered supported by the evidence when they meet rigorous research criteria. Currently, treatment studies that compare two groups of individuals with ASD (e.g., two randomly assigned groups receiving different treatments), that have been successfully replicated, and that have been reviewed by experts in the area are considered to have met the evidence-based criteria. Dr. Green highlighted the need to define criteria for evaluating research studies that look at the

effectiveness of treatment for a single participant as opposed to groups of individuals. These "single-subject" studies can add important information to the literature surrounding interventions in ASD. This research design is especially important given the different strengths and weaknesses of each individual with ASD and the need for interventions tailored to each person.

Dr. Mary-Jane Weiss summarized interventions currently supported by research evidence. At this time, Discrete Trial Training (DTT) has been the most researched and widely used intervention for children with ASD. Dr. Weiss noted that some previous highly structured DTT programs have evolved to include more naturalistic ABA strategies to increase generalization and initiation. It is important that the field continue to move in this direction in order to best meet the needs of people with ASD. Naturalistic strategies, such as incidental teaching, Pivotal Response Treatments (PRT), and Natural Language Paradigm (NLP) emphasize the importance of using child-led teaching and motivation in the natural environment in order to increase initiation, spontaneity and communication. Dr. James Partington also discussed the importance of using child motivation in order to encourage active participation in intervention. These strategies represent advantages over traditional DTT approaches. Future research needs to study the relative strengths of DTT and more naturalistic approaches, and how they can be best used to target specific skills.

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In addition to emphasizing the importance of interventions supported by evidence, Dr. Weiss recognized the need to use clinical judgement in order to meet individual learner needs. Particularly, when applying interventions that show preliminary effectiveness.

Dr. Laura Schreibman further discussed the importance of individualizing treatment, as intervention research thus far reveals considerable variability in response to treatment. More specifically, individualizing intervention will help to increase the overall number of children who respond to treatment, and will allow parents and clinicians to fit the best intervention to the individual child. Dr. Schreibman's research has focused on identifying individual child variables that lead to successful outcomes in specific interventions. As an example, better outcomes in PRT programs were found in children who demonstrated a high interest in toys and more frequently approached people rather than avoided them. These same characteristics did not lead to better child outcomes with DTT. This preliminary research suggests that specific child characteristics may lead to better response in one treatment over another. Dr. Schreibman suggests that future research try to identify child characteristics that lead to successful outcome in other interventions. In addition, she recommends investigations that look at other variables that may affect successful outcome in interventions. These might include such factors as parent and family characteristics (e.g., stress, support), cultural and neurophysiological (e.g., brain structures and activity) variables. Like Dr. Weiss, she speculated as to whether certain skills are best taught with particular interventions and recommended this as another key area for research.

Dr. Schreibman, in collaboration with Drs. Bob and Lynn Koegel, is also involved in a large-scale study comparing the teaching of early communication skills with PRT and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). In his presentation, Dr. Andy Bondy provided an overview of PECS and why it can effectively promote early communication skills in children with ASD. The PRT-PECS study is examining whether early communication is best taught with one intervention or the other, and more specifically whether certain child characteristics lead to better outcomes in one over the other.

Finally, two speakers emphasized the need to create effective interventions for school-aged children and adults with ASD, in light of the attention that has been given to early intervention.

Dr. Ilene Schwartz highlighted that interventions geared towards school-aged children with ASD share a number of characteristics with early interventions. Specifically interventions for school-aged children should be individualized, should occur in the natural environment, should be based on the principles of ABA (e.g., emphasize functional approaches to behaviour, include decisions based on data collection), be comprehensive, and should include families in decision making. In order to facilitate all of these goals, Dr. Schwartz stressed the importance of multi-disciplinary teams. Such teams may include parents, teachers, Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Pathologists, and para-educators.

Dr. Gregory MacDuff also indicated that effective intervention programs for adults share a number of key characteristics with early intervention programs. Planning for adult intervention programs should start early and programs should be comprehensive (i.e., teach a variety of skills that will continue to be useful in future environments). As well, adult intervention programs should involve continuous monitoring of skills through data collection.

This year's conference highlighted a number of key issues in the area of ASD intervention. A strong emphasis on evidence-based practices, improving treatment through increasing child motivation and incorporating naturalistic strategies, individualization of treatment and attending to treatment issues across the lifespan were all issues discussed throughout the various presentations. Not only did the conference provide registrants with useful, research-based strategies to help in their work with people with ASD, it pointed the way for future research aimed at further improving interventions for individuals and families affected by ASD.

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