

WHAT IS TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT IN THE TREATMENT OF AUTISM?

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An interesting trend has developed within the research community over last few years. There has been a tremendous increase in the emphasis on conducting what is known as *translational research*. Translational research is a glossy term for research conducted in the community setting. Through this method, researchers seek to translate what they have learned from controlled University laboratory studies and apply their findings in more natural environments, such as schools or community mental health agencies. The result is that scientific discoveries are translated into practical and ready-to-use applications. Without this essential ingredient, we can never be completely confident that our findings will generalize to other settings. With the push toward more applied research methods, researchers and practitioners are now increasingly more aware that this “bench-to-bedside” approach is a necessary evolution in our study of how to develop effective treatments for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It is one thing for researchers to develop new approaches to treating autism in University studies; but, how do these findings translate into programs we can use in the real world? That is the principal question driving the movement toward translational autism research.

In line with the rising demand for translational research in the treatment of ASDs, there has also been increasing pressure to implement what are known as evidence-based treatments, or EBTs. EBT refers to the use of mental and behavioral health interventions for which empirical research has provided statistically significant evidence for the successful treatment of a specific set of problems. In recent years, the importance of using EBTs has been stressed not only by professional organizations, but by health insurance providers, parents, and consumers. In conjunction with the movement toward translational research, the use of EBTs in the community setting offers exciting new advances in the treatment of ASD.

Historically, within the autism research community, much emphasis has been placed on understanding the etiology of autism. In fact, the majority of autism research dollars have been spent on trying to find the causes for this mysterious disorder. Yet, parents of children with autism, or people living with an ASD want to know what can be done to help *now*. The push towards translational research is the next major step to ensure that individuals are receiving the best evidence-based treatments!

The movement toward empirically based approaches in community mental health has created a need for community based resources to pair with local universities in order to validate treatments. An essential first step in transitioning research from the University to the community or school setting involves developing relationships with community or school partners. The development of these partnerships is typically complex and involves many elements that may be unfamiliar to researchers, mental health practitioners, and educators. Fortunately, through a groundbreaking collaboration between two of the nation's leading institutions, these two worlds have been joined.

Launched in 2007, The Help Group – UCLA Autism Research Alliance is a unique partnership between The Help Group, a leader in autism education, and the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. Through the pioneering vision of Dr. Barbara Firestone, President and CEO of The Help Group, and Dr. Peter Whybrow, Director of the UCLA Semel Institute, the Alliance provides an internationally recognized model for this type of a collaborative relationship and is at the vanguard of work that promises to discover new ways to improve the lives of individuals with ASD.

To date, nearly a dozen exciting and innovative translational research initiatives have been funded to study the efficacy of treatment interventions for individuals with ASDs. Current areas of research include interventions using joint attention to improve language development; decreasing social anxiety in children with autism; and improving friendship quality and social skills for teenagers and young adults with ASD, to name a few. Some Alliance projects are attracting national and international attention for their promise in providing practical new programs to make a difference for those with ASD. One such study involves the translation of an evidence-based treatment for improving social skills for adolescents with ASD. In this study, funded by the Nathan and Lily Shapell Foundation, middle school teachers at The Help Group's Village Glen School are currently implementing a 14-week curriculum to improve friendships for students with ASD.

Through efforts like these, translational autism research is taking the critical next step into the real world of special education classrooms – while researchers continue to explore answers to some of the long standing questions about how best to treat individuals with ASDs.