



Early Intervention: The Key to Unlocking Potential

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The incidence of autism is increasing at a relentless pace. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research that confirms the positive effects of early identification and intensive early intervention — powerful tools that enable many children with autism to more fully realize their potential.

Let's consider the facts.... Current research reveals that autism can be reliably detected as early as 18 months of age and that some key early warning signs appear before 12 months of age. In contrast, studies indicate that 50% of children with autism remain undiagnosed until Kindergarten. Delays in the diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder are even longer. However, many parents suspect a developmental problem well in advance of a formal diagnosis even though they may not associate these issues with autism.

When parents first suspect that their child is developing differently, it is imperative that they share their concerns with their pediatrician as soon as possible. Typically, if the pediatrician determines that there is a problem or potential problem, the parents will be given a referral to the appropriate professionals for further assessment. These professionals may include developmental pediatricians, neurologists, psychologists, child psychiatrists and/or speech and language pathologists.

Many parents report that when they related their initial concerns to their pediatrician, they were told "don't worry," and that their child would "grow out of it." Drs. Perri Klass and Eileen Costello, co-authors of *Quirky Kids*, suggest that if a pediatrician feels there is no need for follow-up but the parents have a lingering suspicion, they should revisit the topic with their pediatrician. If the parents continue to have concerns, they should see a specialist for further evaluation. The evaluation provides important information as to whether or not there is a problem, the type and severity of the problem and the next steps to be taken.

If a formal diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder is made, or the evaluator concludes that some early indicators that autism may be present, it is of critical importance that the parents seek intervention services — the sooner the better. Although the diagnosis can be overwhelming and anxiety-producing for the family, early detection and early intervention are the parents' best frontline offense in confronting the challenges. Due to the plasticity of the developing brain, children with autism have a greater chance for successful outcomes when intensive interventions are started before 5 years of age. During this window of opportunity, children can make substantial progress in many areas of development.

Prior to the age of 3, early intervention usually involves clinic and/or home-based services, such as behavior therapy, infant stimulation, speech and language therapy and parent training and support. Children 3 through 5 years of age can benefit from these services, however, specialized preschool intervention programs may be a more powerful option.

Although there is no consensus regarding the exclusive use of any particular teaching/treatment approach, research supports that there are several key components that should be part of any effective preschool program. The most important factor is intensity in terms of time, individualization of curriculum and level of structure in the environment. The curriculum should be based upon behavioral learning principles and be developmentally oriented. Data (record keeping) should be collected and reviewed on the child's performance and progress in all areas on a daily basis. The program must have built-in strategies that enable the child to maintain his/her newly acquired skills and use them in other settings (e.g. at home, in the community). Parents are the key to providing continuity between the school and home environments. Therefore, parental involvement, training and support are important to the child's success. It is important to emphasize that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to teaching children with autism, and successful programs often combine several intervention approaches to meet the individual needs of the child.

The Help Group's Young Learners Preschool is a specialized, comprehensive and intensive intervention program for 3 to 5 year olds with all forms of autism, ranging from mild to severe. Its primary goal is to provide an interdisciplinary educational program that promotes growth in social, communication, behavior, play, pre-academic and motor skills. In this five-day-a-week, six-hour-a-day program, class size is small, with a low student-to-adult ratio (1 staff for every 2 to 3 children).

Young Learners uniquely draws upon a wide range of proven strategies to optimally serve each child and is innovative in its ability to modify the program to meet the changing needs of the child. The philosophy is not that the child must fit the program, but that the program must be designed to fit the child. Young Learners is designed to build upon the strengths of each child. It is simultaneously developmental/relational, behavioral, naturalistic, and designed to promote learning, communication and social skills. Strategies include, but are not limited to, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Discrete Trial Training (DTT), Pivotal Response Training (PRT), TEACCH, Floortime (DIR), Whole Language Approach, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and Sensory Integration (SI). Early play and socialization training, art, music, dance and dramatic play are important elements of the program. All programming is provided on an individual and/or group basis. For example, a child can work on developing communication skills individually during a discrete trial training session, in a small group during a social skills activity and in a larger group during circle time.

At Young Learners, children receive all behavioral, cognitive, social, speech and language, occupational, sensory integration therapies and adaptive physical education during the school day. This "under one roof" approach is committed to team teaching, consultation and collaboration amongst all staff. Of great importance is the fact that Young Learners relieves parents of the often painstaking search for services and the coordination of these services from different providers in the community.

All of the students graduating from Young Learners this year have made significant progress relative to their ability when they entered the program. In fact, nearly 40% of the current graduating class is able to enter Kindergarten in regular education settings with minimal or no additional adult support required. Early intervention can have a remarkable impact. We look forward to a time when early detection, diagnosis and intervention are routinely available to all children with autism.

As a parent of a recent graduate of Young Learners said, "You always hear about early intervention, but until I put my son into a specialized preschool, I didn't really understand how important it was. Now, 'early' and 'intense' are two words I would swear by."

For more information, please visit www.TheHelpGroup.org or email autism@thehelpgroup.org

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