

## The Critical Role of Early Intervention in Autism

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Autism is part of a spectrum of developmental disabilities in which symptoms generally become apparent in children by age 2 to 3 years of age. It is also a condition that has shown a dramatic increase in the number of children affected over the past 10 years, such that the prevalence has recently been quoted as high as 1 in 200 children. Part of the rise in the incidence of autism has been attributed to better diagnostic protocols and more “awareness” of the disability in the community.

As parents and professionals are becoming proficient in recognizing the early symptoms of autism, children are being diagnosed at younger and younger ages. When treatment is begun immediately, the early identification of autism can have a profound effect on a child’s overall development. There is much research and scientific evidence validating that children with autism have a greater chance for successful outcomes when interventions are started at an early age (before 5 years of age). Thus, the development of appropriate, research-based early intervention programs is a primary focus for professionals, educators and parents throughout the United States.

### **What Is Early Intervention?**

Early interventions for the autistic population are developmentally and educationally based treatment programs available to children from birth to five years of age. The goal is to provide intensive therapeutic interventions that will allow the child to develop skills in all areas affecting his/her overall functioning level. With regard to autism, the best early intervention programs focus on teaching the child to attend to relevant stimuli (e.g., those necessary for learning), to imitate others, to use and comprehend language or some form of communication system, to play appropriately with toys and to learn to interact in a socially appropriate manner. When these skills are taught at a young age, a reduction in maladaptive behaviors, such as tantrumming, aggression, self-stimulation (e.g., hand flapping) and self-injurious behaviors are seen. In addition, early intervention plays a critical role in reducing the need for life-long intervention services.

### **What Makes An Effective Early Intervention Program?**

As with most educational programming, controversy abounds when discussing what is necessary for early intervention with autistic children. This controversy is not so much about the apparent need for such programs, but rather how the services should be delivered and how often. However, every state that has designed educational “best practices” for autism has listed the following characteristics as essential in any early intervention program:

- The teaching techniques should be modeled upon research-based methods and curriculum. Data (record keeping) must be kept to monitor the child’s acquisition of skills.
- A highly supportive teaching environment, including the use of specially trained teachers, assistants and aides.
- Built-in strategies for generalization.
- Due to the nature of how autistic children learn, the teaching program must be highly structured, predictable and routine-oriented.

- A functional approach to behavior difficulties must be implemented.
- Parent support and training is mandatory.
- The program should be staffed to provide the necessary support to allow each individual child to progress and his/her own pace.

It has been well documented that autistic children do not learn in traditional preschool or group settings. They required individualized, one-on-one teaching to address the uniqueness of their communication, social, behavioral and learning difficulties. When autistic children are provided with intensive early intervention that is specifically designed to meet the breadth of their needs, the speed of the children's development can be increased and may lead to a better long-term prognosis. Appropriate interventions for autistic children should begin as early as possible to take advantage of the "window of opportunity" that exists when the child's brain is still developing and is malleable. Much research has shown that there are critical periods for developing certain skills (such as the ability to use verbal language proficiently) and that the earlier these skills can be taught, the better chance a child has of fully mastering them.

The Help Group offers early intervention through its Young Learners Therapeutic Preschool and Early Intervention Center for toddler and preschool-aged children with autism. This innovative program utilizes the most effective early intervention practices in the field. While there is currently no cure for autism, intensive early intervention is key to maximizing the child's growth and development. For further information, please contact Dr. Laurie Stephens at 818-947-5542.

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