

Early Intervention for ASD

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Over the past several decades there have been many changes in the world of autism. Present terminology and diagnostic criteria have changed since the publication of the diagnostic and statistical manual 5th edition (DSM 5). This has resulted in the term autism spectrum disorder (ASD) replacing previous diagnostic terms -Aspergers, PDD-NOS, and Autism. Despite these changes in terminology the one constant over the years is the impact and importance of early intervention in treating ASD. (1)

Current studies have shown we can now reliably diagnose autism as young as 12-15 months of age. Given this ability to detect the earliest signs of autism we can intervene early and profoundly impact the course of ASD. Large groups of children are experiencing better outcomes due to the impact of early intervention.

It is easy to understand why early intervention is so important and so impactful. We all know the brain undergoes rapid growth and development in the first 5 years of life. During this time the pathways controlling language, socialization and repetitive behavior are being established. (2) Interrupting the abnormal development and reinforcing the typical milestones and development are the goal of all of the early intervention therapies – speech, occupational, physical, and behavioral therapies as well as therapeutic educational environments. This is also the time many families choose to experiment with diets and supplements.

The therapies with the most data and evidence for early intervention include speech, occupational, physical, and behavioral therapies. Programs will consist of different combinations of these therapies to address your child's unique needs. Behavioral therapy is a broad umbrella term for different interventions aimed at targeting the child's behavior and interaction style. The goal of all of the therapies in an early intervention

program is to promote the child's ability to attend to the environment, develop verbal and motor imitation skills, develop language and functional communication, learn appropriate social interaction skills, learn appropriate play skills, and develop friendships with age appropriate peers. A critical component of the early intervention process is family education and training. Family training helps insure everyone in the child's environment can work to develop his or her potential.

Some parents fear an ASD diagnosis and feel it is stigmatizing. Quite the contrary, early diagnosis should be viewed as an opportunity to dramatically change a child's development. To lose this window of opportunity is to miss the chance of an optimal outcome. No one would ever think of delaying treatment of cancer, infection, or injury, why is ASD any different? Though children progress at different rates and some children undergo more dramatic positive effects than others from early intervention, no child is harmed by early treatment. There is only something to be gained. We are living in a time where it is not uncommon to see a child move off the autism spectrum and actually lose their diagnosis. Parents who worry diagnosing their child is premature should remember, behavioral diagnoses such as ASD can be removed if children progresses to the point symptoms are no longer present or detectable.

However in spite of all of this evidence studies show diagnoses are still delayed. The average age of diagnosis of ASD in the US is still 4 years of age.⁽³⁾ Parents are often the first to observe atypical development and first to voice concern. Unfortunately early treatment can be derailed by medical professionals and others. This is why it is so important for parents to trust their instincts and find a team of professional with enough background and expertise in treating ASD so as not to miss the window of opportunity early intervention provides. Without a diagnosis children can be deprived of insurance coverage and specialized programs. With a diagnosis children and families will have access to public and privately funded programs targeted for ASD. Hence, the notion that children are prematurely labeled and over diagnosed with a host of neuro-developmental disorders must be balanced against the dangers of a wait and see approach. No doubt some children may be prematurely diagnosed; the fallout from this is early

intervention which may not have been necessary. This is an issue which concerns use of limited resources more than any untoward effects of therapy. Early intervention promotes development regardless of the ultimate diagnostic status of a child.

Fear is a powerful emotion which can blind and distort how we see things. In being the best possible parent and caring for your child you owe it to him/her to face the challenges of ASD through early intervention. Early intervention provides tools and strategies which help parents to connect to their child and also serve a vital member of the treatment team. This is empowering and promotes a positive outlook which also influences a child's progress. Remember " A pessimist is one who makes difficulties out of his opportunities, and optimist is one who makes opportunities out of his difficulties" – Harry S.Truman

For more information about red flags and earliest signs of ASD visit www.draronsonramos.com , www.firstsigns.org, and www.autismspeaks.org

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