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The evidence on early intervention for children on the autism spectrum tells us that each child is unique, so interventions should reflect a child's individual needs.

The research also emphasises the important role of parents.

The research suggests that positive effects on a range of child and family outcomes are seen in behavioural interventions, developmental interventions, naturalistic developmental behavioural interventions, technology-based interventions, and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

Autism CRC Report: What did we review?

In May 2020, the NDIA engaged the Autism CRC to undertake an independent review of the best available evidence about early intervention approaches for children on the Autism spectrum aged up to 12 years.

The review helps answer questions about the effects of these interventions on outcomes for children, their parents and caregivers.

Two reports, compiled by some of Australia's leading Autism experts, provide a comprehensive review of the current evidence about non-pharmacologic interventions for children on the Autism spectrum.

The reports summarise the latest theory and research evidence regarding which interventions are more likely to have a positive effect on which child and family outcomes.

The NDIA's early childhood approach is based on best practice, international standards of family centred practices, with the child's parents, carers, family members and educators playing an important role.

The information in this report will help parents and caregivers make informed decisions about how best to support their child's learning and social participation.

What the evidence shows

- The evidence reinforces the important role of parents. There is evidence that both parent-led (also called caregiver-mediated intervention) and peer-led interventions have a positive effect on children and their families. The outcomes when parents were involved in the intervention were sometimes greater than interventions delivered by clinical practitioners or educators alone.

- The report found there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach. No single intervention improves developmental outcomes for all children on the Autism spectrum. The report describes the main interventions and groups them into eight categories that reflect the different reasons as to how they are thought to work.
- Some intervention practices are designed to target one aspect of child development or family wellbeing, whereas others target multiple areas at once.
- Intervention practices may therefore be delivered in isolation, or in combination, depending on the needs and preferences of the individual child and family.
- The report shows that there is no consistent evidence to suggest that more intervention leads to better outcomes.
- Across the different categories of intervention, there was evidence of positive effects for behavioural interventions, developmental interventions, Naturalistic developmental behavioural interventions, technology-based interventions, and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy on a range of child and family outcomes.
- The expertise of a range of clinical practitioners spanning health, education and medical disciplines may be beneficial to the child and their family.
- There is almost no evidence about the effects of intervention practices on quality of life outcomes, which highlights an urgent research priority.

Report summaries

Download the Autism CRC’s review of evidence for interventions for children on the autism spectrum - community summaries:

- Community summary - narrative review (DOCX 812KB)
- Community summary - narrative review (PDF 1MB)
- Community summary - umbrella review (DOCX 934KB)
- Community summary - umbrella review (PDF 550KB).

There are eight category overviews designed to help people learn about different interventions and their research evidence:

- Animal-assisted interventions overview
- Behavioural interventions overview
- Cognitive behaviour therapy overview
- Developmental interventions overview
- Naturalistic developmental behavioural interventions overview
- Sensory-based interventions overview
- Technology-based interventions overview
- TEACCH interventions overview.

To understand the information in its full context, we encourage you to access the full report .

What does this mean for families?

The reviews will assist the NDIA to promote the most beneficial and ethical interventions for children on the Autism spectrum.

There will be further work done with experts, parents and people with Autism to further strengthen our evidence based findings.

The findings from this report will inform consultations on best practice interventions over the coming months.

Getting appropriate support, early in familiar settings is essential to any child reaching their full potential.

If you, or someone you know, are worried that your child is developing slower than their peers, you can seek support and advice by contacting an NDIS early childhood partner in your local area .

Getting appropriate support, early in familiar settings is essential to any child reaching their full potential.

In some areas, we don’t have early childhood partners to deliver our early childhood approach.

Where partners are not available, you can speak with your doctor, maternal and child health nurse, or other health professional.

You can also contact your nearest NDIA office.

For further information use the Contact Us page or call 1800 800 110.

Visit our Help for children younger than 9 page for more information about support for young children.