

MSU researcher advocates new way to treat autism

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Brooke Ingersoll, assistant professor of psychology at Michigan State University, is calling for a new method of teaching children with autism. Credit: Michigan State University

Children with autism would likely receive better treatment if supporters of the two major teaching methods stopped bickering over theory and focused on a combined approach, a Michigan State University psychologist argues in a new paper.

For years, the behavioral and developmental camps have argued over which theory is more effective in teaching communication and other skills to preschool-aged children with [autism](#). Basically, behaviorists believe learning occurs through reinforcement or reward while

developmental advocates stress learning through important interactions with caregivers.

But while the theories differ, the actual methods the two camps ultimately use to teach children can be strikingly similar, especially when the treatment is naturalistic, or unstructured, said Brooke Ingersoll, MSU assistant professor of psychology.

In the January issue of the *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, Ingersoll contends that advocates of the behavioral and developmental approaches should set aside their differences and use the best practices from each to meet the needs of the student and the strengths of the parent or teacher.

"We need to stop getting so hung up on whether the behavioral approach is better than the developmental approach and vice versa," Ingersoll said. "What we really need to start looking at is what are the actual intervention techniques being used and how are these effective."

An estimated one out of every 110 children in the United States has autism and the number of diagnosed cases is growing, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Symptoms typically surface by a child's second birthday and the disorder is four to five times more likely to occur in boys than in girls.

Ingersoll said the behavioral and developmental treatment methods both can be effective on their own. But historically, advocates for each have rarely collaborated on treatment development for children with autism, meaning it's unknown whether a combined approach is more effective.

Ingersoll expects it is. She is trained in both methods and has created a combined curriculum on social communication that she's teaching to preschool instructors in Michigan's Ottawa, Livingston and Clinton

counties. Through the MSU-funded project, the instructors then teach the method to parents of autistic children.

Ingersoll said the combined method works, but it will probably take a few years of research to determine if it's more effective than a singular approach.

"I'm not necessarily advocating for a new philosophical approach - the reality is that neither side is likely to change their philosophy," Ingersoll said. "What I am advocating is more of a pragmatic approach that involves combining the interventions in different ways to meet the needs of the child or the caregiver. I think that will build better interventions."

Provided by Michigan State University

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