

# Validating preschool programs for children with autism

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Researchers from the University of Miami (UM) Department of Psychology participated in a multi-site study to examine different teaching models for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The study is one of the first to look at the fidelity of treatment models for preschoolers with autism. The findings are published online in the current issue of the journal *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

The report concludes the first phase of a four-year project to analyze the comparative efficacy of [preschool programs](#) for [children](#) with ASD. It involves developing and validating assessment measures to demonstrate that the classrooms in the study are actually implementing the teaching models at high levels of adherence.

The researchers found that the assessment instruments they developed accurately measured how well the models were executed in the classrooms and that these measurements were able to discriminate between diverse teaching approaches. The goal is for these tools to provide an evaluation method for intervention programs for children with autism, all over the country, explains Michael Alessandri, clinical professor of Psychology, in the College of Arts and Sciences, executive director of UM/Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, (UM-NSU CARD), director of the Division of Community Outreach and Development at UM and principal investigator for the UM component of the project.

"This is an important first step. We hope that the utilization of these

kinds of fidelity tools will enable schools to more closely monitor the degree to which intervention methods are being delivered, relative to what the model intends," he said. "If these useful methods are adopted, parents will have a way to assess the quality of their child's treatment."

The scientists looked at two comprehensive programs for [autistic children](#) in preschool: the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) and the Learning Experiences and Alternative Programs for Preschoolers and Their Parents (LEAP). The two models were chosen because they are well established and widely used in public school systems in the U.S.

The study took place in 34 classrooms, during four months of the school year. A maximum of four observations were made in each class. The findings may help explain differences in children's responses to different intervention treatments, explains Anibal Gutierrez, assistant scientist of UM-NSU CARD and co-author of the study.

"If we can ensure that the different programs are all good programs, implemented at a high level of fidelity, then we may be able to attribute differences in outcomes to individual child differences," said Gutierrez. "We could explain why children with a particular profile may benefit from one program over another."

Understanding how closely an intervention model adheres to its intended plan may also help to scale up programs within the broader community, explains Drew Coman, Ph.D. student in the Department of Psychology at UM and co-author of the study.

"I believe these measure not only provide a brief guide to implement one of these treatment programs, but they also provide a way to see the strengths of a particular classroom as well as identify the features that may need a bit more support and improvement," said Coman.

"Ultimately, these measures provide a means to conduct such evaluations, and will hopefully lead to more support for teachers, better classrooms, and ideally improved student outcomes for students with ASD."

**More information:** "Assessing implementation of comprehensive treatment models for young children with ASD: Reliability and validity of two measures" *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

Provided by University of Miami

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