

Children with autism benefit from early, intensive therapy

September 28 2011

A primary characteristic of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is impairments in social-communication skills. Children and adolescents with social-communication problems face difficulty understanding, interacting and relating with others. University of Missouri researchers found that children who receive more intensive therapy to combat these impairments, especially at early ages, achieve the best outcomes.

"It's important for children with autism to begin treatment as soon as possible," said Micah Mazurek, assistant professor in the School of Health Professions and the Thompson Center for Autism and [Neurodevelopmental Disorders](#). "The more intense or comprehensive the therapy, the better it is in terms of helping children improve social and communication skills."

Data was collected from more than 1,000 children and adolescents with ASD. The researchers measured fifteen social-communication skills, including [facial expressions](#), gestures, [language comprehension](#), sharing enjoyment and appropriate social responses. When examining change over time in these skills, the majority (95.4 percent) demonstrated improvement.

Those who received therapy, including behavioral, speech, and occupational therapy, had the best outcomes. The response to therapy was greatest among those with higher nonverbal IQs. Controlling for age and symptom severity, children who received more intensive treatment at younger ages experienced greater advancements in social-

communication symptoms.

"With regard to social-communicative symptom severity, our study reveals that it is not IQ alone that contributes to improvements over time," Mazurek said. "Instead, having a higher IQ may allow children to make greater gains in various types of treatments. Although IQ scores of children with ASD may be strongly influenced by their capacity for attention and ability to comply with tasks results indicate the need to design and examine [alternative treatment](#) approaches for those with intellectual impairments."

For those children who were nonverbal at age 5, the researchers found that IQ and intensity of speech therapy most significantly predicted the acquisition of speech. The findings indicate that targeted, intensive treatments may be most successful in improving specific skills.

Mazurek is an assistant professor in the Department of Health Psychology. The study, "Predicting improvement in social-communication symptoms of [autism spectrum disorders](#) using retrospective treatment data," will be published in *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. The research was funded by a grant from the Simons Foundation, a private foundation based in New York City that supports research to improve the diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Children with autism benefit from early, intensive therapy (2011, September 28) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-09-children-autism-benefit-early-intensive.html>

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