

Young children with autism benefit regardless of high-quality treatment model

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Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have found that preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who receive high-quality early intervention benefit developmentally regardless of the treatment model used—a surprising result that may have important implications for special-education programs and school classrooms across the country.

"This is the first study designed to compare long-standing comprehensive treatment models for [young children](#) with ASD," said Brian Boyd, a fellow at UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) and one of the study's co-[principal investigators](#). Boyd also is an assistant professor in occupational science and occupational therapy in UNC's School of Medicine.

"We know that more children are being diagnosed with ASD each year, and that it can cost an estimated \$3.2 million to treat each child over a lifetime. Understanding that a child can benefit from a high-quality program, rather than a specialized program, may help reduce those costs by decreasing the need for teachers and other school practitioners to be trained to deliver multiple specialized services," Boyd said. He stressed it remains important to ensure educators are trained to provide high-quality programs that meet the special behavioral, communication and other needs of children with ASD.

Previous research has shown that when children with ASD have access to early intervention via treatment programs, they improve

developmentally. Until now, however, debate has persisted over which approach to use, said Boyd. The study appeared in the June issue of *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Two frequently used comprehensive treatment models have a long history: LEAP (Learning Experiences and Alternative Program for Preschoolers and their Parents) and TEACCH (now known only by its acronym).

FPG's study examined the relative effects of the LEAP and TEACCH school-based comprehensive treatment models when compared to each other and to special-education programs that do not use a specific model. The multisite study took place only in high-quality classrooms and enrolled 74 teachers and 198 3- to 5-year-olds in public school districts.

The study found that children made gains over the school year regardless of the classroom's use of LEAP, TEACCH or no specific comprehensive treatment model. "Each group of children showed significant positive change in autism severity, communication and fine- motor skills," said Kara Hume, FPG scientist and co-author. "No statistically significant differences were found among models, which challenged our initial expectations—and likely the field's."

"This study may shift the field's thinking about comprehensive treatment models designed for young [children](#) with ASD," said co-author Samuel L. Odom, FPG's director and the study's principal investigator. "Perhaps it's not the unique features of the models that most contribute to child gains but the common features of the models that most influence child growth."

More information: "Comparative Efficacy of LEAP, TEACCH and Non-Model-Specific Special Education Programs for Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Journal of Autism and Developmental*

Disorders, published online June 2013. link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-013-1877-9

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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