

Children with autism benefit when parents are trained to provide at-home interventions

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A summary of 50 studies found that when parents were educated in ways to offer interventions at home, children saw marked improvement in social skills as well as language and communication skills. Credit: Nate Edwards

Training and empowering parents to provide at-home interventions to

children with autism spectrum disorder helps children improve in positive behaviors and language communication skills says a new study from BYU.

"We've known for a long time that [early interventions](#) for children with autism improve learning and [social skills](#) at a greater rate than if interventions are offered later," said Timothy B. Smith, BYU counseling psychology professor. "The problem lies in the bottleneck between the small number of practitioners available and the large numbers of children with symptoms who aren't receiving treatment. Many can spend months on a waitlist before meeting a clinician."

Utilizing at-home interventions in conjunction with professional clinical treatment is one way to expand treatment services. The study, recently published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, found that when [parents](#) provide interventions at home, children saw marked improvement in social skills as well as language and communication skills when compared to children receiving no specialized home interventions.

Parents could be taught strategies that they can use to help their child develop social, communication, and play skills. For instance, they would be trained on how to help a child focus on desired tasks, or how to take turns when interacting with others. Parents would be empowered to implement these tactics throughout the course of the day.

"There is no scientific justification to not train parents," said Smith. "A parent can constantly reinforce social behaviors if they know what to look for and how to do it. It's about meeting the kids where they're at. It has a potentially remarkable impact on child outcomes."

The researchers conducted a [meta-analysis](#) of over 50 different studies to understand the impact of parent-led interventions. In total, the studies

included 2,895 child participants with an average age of five and a half. On average, parents received about 90 minutes of intervention training each week. Impact on [child development](#) was measured using direct observation by a professional as well as parent and observer ratings. No differences were observed when the mother, father, or both implemented interventions.

Moderate gains in development while they're young crescendo over time, said Smith. Children with [autism spectrum disorder](#) who benefit from home interventions will enter preschool more prepared and they'll leave preschool feeling more equipped for kindergarten.

"They'll get more out of first grade and then [second grade](#), and the effect continues to multiply," he said. "That trajectory then continues to widen the path where the child will end up across their lifetime."

When considered with lifelong costs associated with education, [social programs](#) and eventually welfare programs that take care of adults with disabilities, Smith estimates that parent-led interventions are a procedure that could save billions of dollars.

Researchers say they're hopeful that such findings can be used by lawmakers to introduce legislation to add parent training as a covered benefit of insurance policies, like recent changes in federal legislation that offered insurance coverage of professional treatment for children with developmental delays.

"Kids diagnosed with ASD are higher functioning today than even 20 years ago because they're getting interventions when they're one or two years old," said Dr. Tina Taylor, associate dean in the David O. McKay School of Education, and co-author of the study. "We need continued resources to help equip parents to help their children. Parents are able and willing to help their children build the skills they need to be

successful and make huge contributions to the world."

Additionally, when pediatricians find symptoms of developmental delays in well child visits, they could immediately make the recommendation for parent training programs, while simultaneously making referrals for professional services.

"Intensive interventions can require 25 hours or more per week, and it's unrealistic to expect that solely from a professional provider. Parents can have the knowledge and skills to help their children develop," said Linda Cheng, lead author of the paper and current doctoral student studying educational inquiry, measurement and evaluation in the McKay School. "If we only stay with the traditional methods of treatments, we're missing an opportunity to help those in need."

For parents interested in learning more about strategies of parent led interventions, Smith suggests exploring the online resources offered by [Project-Impact](#).

More information: Wai Man Cheng et al, Effects of Parent-Implemented Interventions on Outcomes of Children with Autism: A Meta-Analysis, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-022-05688-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-022-05688-8)

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