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Parental intervention is best for their autistic toddlers

November 4, 2014

12:36 PM MST

Toddlers with [autism](#) demonstrate significant improvement in life skills after intensive intervention by their parents when compared to interventions by clinicians, says a new study by [Florida State University](#) (FSU). The study was announced on Nov. 3, 2014 and was published in the journal "Pediatrics" as "Parent-Implemented Social Intervention for Toddlers With Autism: An RCT."

"We've come up with a treatment model that can teach parents to support their [child's](#) learning during everyday activities, and we've documented that the children improved their developmental level, social communication skills and autism symptoms," said Amy Wetherby, director of the Autism Institute at FSU's College of Medicine and lead author of the study.

Interventions focus on things that children with autism struggle to learn such as how to use objects and social communication. Social communication skills include eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, sharing emotions, making sounds, listening, and understanding words. Wetherby says that these interventions are affordable and helps clinicians to use their time efficiently.

The study examined the families of 82 [autistic](#) children who were 18 months old during a seven-year randomized-control trial. The families were assigned to one of two nine-month interventions. Researchers taught the parents in a group once a week, and taught another group individually in their homes three times a week for six months, and then twice a week for another three weeks.

"For both, children improved in using words and autism symptoms, however, children in the second group improved even more on understanding and social communication, demonstrating the impact of the individual sessions at home," Wetherby said. "With our specialized methodology, we taught families to work with their children 20 to 25 hours a week in their everyday activities - not only play but also meals and snacks, caregiving, family chores — and taught them how to bring their children into that activity. We also taught them how to go out in the community, how to take the child to a playground, to a grocery store, to a restaurant, and use these strategies."

Wetherby says they taught parents how to push their children. He also stated that the earlier parents start to work with their children in fun and successful learning moments, the more likely the parents were to change how their children learn for the rest of their lives. The FSU Autism Institute has developed web-based tools and courses that teach early intervention methods to caregivers, families, and primary care professionals. The interventions are available at their [website](#).

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children are screened for autism between the ages of 18 to 24 months. Unfortunately, most autistic children are not diagnosed until the age of 4 and are diagnosed at older ages in minority, low-income, and rural families.



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