

Effects of Parent-Implemented Intervention for Toddlers with Autism Spectrum

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Description of Early Treatment and Intervention Research Project Funded by Autism Speaks

Previous research suggests that earlier intervention may contribute to better outcomes in autism. Answering the question “how early?” has significant implications for age of screening for autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and age of entry into early intervention. With the increased number of young children identified with ASD or at-risk, there is a pressing need for evidence-based, manualized intervention that is accessible to and implemented by parents within natural environments. This collaborative research project is directed by Dr. Amy Wetherby at Florida State University and Dr. Catherine Lord at University of Michigan and is one of seven early treatment and intervention grants funded by Autism Speaks.

The major research objective is to directly compare two different parent interventions: a parent-implemented intervention (PII) offered in 3 weekly sessions for 9 months using the SCERTS model to teach parents how to embed transactional supports to target social communication and emotional regulation within everyday activities for 25 hours a week; and an information, education and support group (IES) offered twice monthly for 9 months to teach parents how to support their child’s communication, language, and play development and learning and to network with other parents. Each site will recruit 20 children with ASD who are under 18 months of age from three sources: 1) referrals for suspected ASD; 2) screening of high-risk populations, including younger siblings of children with ASD and children referred to early intervention programs; and 3) ASD screening of children recruited by the FIRST WORDS[®] Project from a general pediatric sample. Families will be randomly assigned to either PII or IES as the first condition beginning at 18 months of age and will receive the other condition beginning at 27 months of age, totalling 18 months of intervention. The effectiveness of PII and IES will be examined with growth trajectories of social communication and autism symptoms and group outcomes on verbal and nonverbal developmental level and adaptive behavior. The findings of this study will provide evidence of the effects of parent-implemented intervention using the SCERTS model beginning at 18 months of age and substantiate that autism screening for toddlers is crucial for families to access early intervention.

For more information about this research and related projects:

- To learn more about the Early Social Interaction Project, visit <http://esi.fsu.edu>.
- To learn more about Dr. Wetherby’s research on early red flags of ASD with the FIRST WORDS Project, visit <http://firstwords.fsu.edu>.
- To learn more about Dr. Lord’s research at the University of Michigan Autism and Communication Disorders Center, visit <http://www.umaccweb.com/>.
- To learn more about Autism Speaks, visit www.autismspeaks.org.