



- Title** **Behavioral Interventions for Preschool Children With Autism**
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Aim

- To summarize the evidence and expert opinions regarding behavioral therapy for preschool children with autism or pervasive developmental disorders (PDD)
- To describe current practice regarding behavioral therapy for preschool children with autism or PDD
- To analyze legal case findings
- To summarize key factors that influence the provision of services in Canada.

Conclusions and results

Based on the secondary reviews evaluated, only a few controlled primary studies regarding the efficacy of behavioral interventions have been published. Most of these studies have methodological flaws that make interpretation of results difficult. Although limited, evidence suggests that preschool children with autism show cognitive and functional improvement when they receive behavioral intervention with applied behavioral analysis for about 20 hours per week or more. However, it is unclear which subset of children with autism derive the most benefit, which components of therapy are integral to positive outcomes, whether similar results would be observed in older children, whether there are definable long-term functional benefits, or whether reported gains in IQ translate into happier people with greater functioning in the community. Legal decisions to date offer little guidance on how Canadian courts are likely to resolve claims for provincial funding of services. Key factors that influence the delivery of services in Canada include universal health care, the shift to community-based programming and integration, and the evolution of the diagnostic classification system. It is important for policy makers, program developers and clinical researcher to consider identifying pre-treatment characteristics of those receiving therapy, measuring treatment fidelity, evaluating progress in therapy to determine whether therapy is or continues to be of benefit, and comparing the value of early intensive behavioral therapy to other early interventions for autism.

Methods

Published literature reporting on autism and behavioral interventions was obtained by searching several databases and the Internet, and hand searching selected journals and documents and the bibliographies of selected papers. Retrieval was primarily limited to secondary reviews. Information about Canadian initiatives regarding behavioral interventions and current service provision was retrieved through contacts identified in a survey previously commissioned by the British Columbia Ministry for Children and Families. Contacts with the Canadian Autism Intervention Research Network provided further information.

Further research/reviews required

Future research would benefit from:

- Using standard measures for assessing progress
- Including long-term evaluation of progress
- Comparing therapies using sound study design, including an adequate control group
- Focusing on determining which therapy, at what level of intensity, works best for which subset of children with autism.

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