



**Best therapies for autism spectrum disorders in youth?
Applied behavior analysis (ABA) and
ABA plus developmental social-pragmatic approaches top the list**

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a chronic condition beginning in early childhood defined by impaired social communication and the presence of repetitive behavior that is linked to many troubling short- and long-term outcomes as well as high lifetime costs for families. Fortunately, a rapidly growing body of research shows that early intervention can alleviate defining and associated problems in ASD. In a recent review of interventions for children with ASD under five years old, Drs. Tristram Smith and Suzannah Iadarola at the University of Rochester Medical Center identified two “well-established” interventions for these children. These well-established treatments are considered to have the best research evidence supporting their use. The first is delivered individually by a clinician to a child with ASD, is comprehensive (aimed at addressing multiple areas of need), and is based on a theoretical framework called applied behavior analysis (ABA). In ABA, learning challenges associated with ASD are addressed with strategies such as systematically reinforcing target behaviors and teaching children to distinguish between different cues. Individual, comprehensive ABA has been shown to improve cognitive and adaptive skills in some young children with ASD. The second “well-established” intervention is implemented by teachers, focuses specifically on children’s social communication, and combines ABA with another theoretical framework called developmental social-pragmatic (DSP). DSP interventions are based on the view that a core feature of ASD is an impaired ability to engage in activities jointly with another person. This impairment is thought to lead to a cascade of other problems with social communication and interaction. DSP therapists aim to promote social communication and interaction by being responsive to the child in ways such as imitating, expanding on, or joining into play activities that the child initiates. Teacher-implemented ABA+DSP has been found to improve social communication in some young children with ASD.

In addition to identifying two “well-established” interventions, the review by Drs. Smith and Iadarola classified eight other interventions as “probably” or “possibly efficacious.” All of these interventions are based on ABA, DSP, or a combination. The review also identified a few treatments with limited or no evidence to date that support their use for youth with ASD, including ABA+DSP classrooms and parent training.

In addition, the review noted a recent improvement in the quality and quantity of ASD intervention research. However, it also highlighted many priorities for future research. These priorities include improving outcome measures, developing interventions for under-studied ASD symptoms such as repetitive behaviors, pinpointing mechanisms of action in interventions, and adapting interventions for widespread implementation by community providers.

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RESOURCES: For more information, interested readers can go to www.effectivechildtherapy.com. The website offers free videos on a variety of child/adolescent therapy topics, including videos describing various evidence-based treatment approaches; there are videos for [parents](#) and [professionals](#).

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