

Approaches to supporting children with needs relating to the autism spectrum

Although it is not within the scope of this current report to provide a full and detailed literature review of approaches to meeting the needs of learners with autism, it is possible to provide a brief overview of some relevant research.

It is well documented in research that the most effective approach for meeting the learning needs of children with autism requires flexibility, where the most effective aspects of a range of evidence-based interventions are used depending on the needs of the child. Given the breadth of the term autism and the wide range of needs it encompasses that can manifest differently for different children, it is important to utilise a child-focused approach that takes into account the individual needs of the child (Theara & Abbott, 2015; Volkmar & Wiesner, 2009; Sherratt, 2005).

The evidence-based approaches used in the tri-borough incorporate elements of:

- Individualised interventions that are planned and intensive
- The SCERTS® Model (Social, Communication, Emotional, Regulation, Transactional, Support)
- TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication impaired Children)
- PECS (the Picture Exchange Communication System)
- Makaton sign-language
- Multidisciplinary intervention programmes with input from Local Authority services, including: Speech and Language Therapy; Occupation Therapy Support; Educational Psychology Support; Autism and Early Years Intervention Team
- Specialist education settings designed to meet the needs of autistic learners if appropriate
- Behaviour Analysis techniques

This mixed-model approach includes a clear focus on behavioural principles such as task analysis and reinforcement, as these are considered to be best practise when used in conjunction with other approaches. It has been designed however, to provide more flexibility than traditional behaviourist approaches such as ABA to avoid some of the negative effects of such interventions, such as: dependence by children on adult cues, lack of spontaneity and self-initiated behaviour and difficulties with generalising skills across environments (Schreibman, 2000). The key element underpinning approaches to meeting the needs of learners with autism is that an individualised package of support must be provided, that is tailored to a child's individual needs (Theara & Abbott, 2015; Volkmar & Wiesner, 2009).

In comparison to a mixed-model approach, ABA and related behaviour modification-based programmes typically incorporate a combination of the following practises (Kelly, 2014):

- A focus on observable behaviours only

- Discrete trial training where isolated skills are taught by one-to-one instruction with stimulus (what is to be learned), behaviour response (from child) and reinforcement (reward or removal of reward).
- Early intervention, typically with early year's children.
- An emphasis on ensuring children can access mainstream school
- Comprehensiveness, so all areas of deficit are worked on
- Intensity
- Family participation

Although ABA has been identified to have positive effects when specific individual interventions such as early intensive behavioural intervention are used to help children with autism at an early age; the long term evidence for the effectiveness of this approach is less clear. There is a need for comparative studies of ABA interventions compared to an equally intensive high quality autism-specific programme to provide a clear evidence base for its efficacy above other approaches. Furthermore, there is a lack of evaluation research that identifies the long-term benefits ABA provides in helping children reach long term positive outcomes.

References

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