

FAST BREAKING PAPERS - 2009

June 2009



Johnny L. Matson talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's Fast Breaking Paper in the field of Social Sciences, general.



Article Title: Determining treatment outcome in early intervention programs for **autism spectrum disorders: A critical analysis of measurement issues in learning based interventions**

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Journal: RES DEVELOP DISABIL

Volume: 28

Issue: 2

Page: 207-218

Year: MAR-APR 2007

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SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

With the recent surge in interest surrounding Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), the pressure is on to develop evidence-based interventions which can be successfully implemented at a young age. This article is most likely highly cited because it gives a concise overview of early intervention treatment modalities specific to ASDs. Furthermore, it is among the first to report on various dependent variables used in treatment research and how these variables could influence treatment outcomes.

SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, of synthesis of knowledge?

This article is a first attempt to synthesize what is currently known in the research literature regarding early interventions, both pharmacological and behavioral. ASDs are a "fad magnet" and, therefore, the purpose of this paper was two-fold. First, to give clinicians data on what are considered efficacious interventions for individuals diagnosed with an ASD. Second, to encourage researchers to continue investigating early ASD treatment practices in a more scientific manner.

SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

While it is imperative that children diagnosed with an ASD receive intervention as soon as possible, it is equally crucial that the treatment is scientifically validated. There is an amalgamation of unsupported treatments out there that are not effective. What we do know is that behaviorally based and, to some degree, pharmacological studies have shown the most promise as being empirically supported. Unfortunately, many studies employing these interventions have serious methodological flaws.

Tactics that researchers should consider using to increase the validity of future treatment research include using a matched control group of typically developing same-aged peers; employing more group-based designs instead of single-case

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- [Institutional Interviews](#)
- [Journal Interviews](#)
- [Podcasts](#)

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- [Special Topics](#)

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- [New Hot Papers](#)
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research; using measures which are applicable to ASDs and associated problems (e. g., comorbid Axis I disorders, social skill deficits, language problems, challenging behaviors); stringent criteria for assessing treatment fidelity; and more systematic methods for establishing clinical success.

"...I do foresee the need to develop more efficient methods of treatment monitoring and tracking skill acquisition."

SW: How did you become involved in this research, and were there any problems along the way?

I have been working with individuals diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities for over 30 years. My research mainly focuses on accurate assessment of various aspects of treatment and the functioning of people with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders.

Now, more than ever, there is much out there in regards to interventions for ASDs. Unfortunately, there is also a dearth of stringent criteria for what is regarded as effective scientifically versus what is not. Given that there are parents who will try any intervention in the hopes of helping their child with ASD, there is a critical need for better methods of dictating what is supported versus what is not.

SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?

There is still much to be done in regards to accurate assessment and treatment implementation in the field of ASDs. However, I do foresee the need to develop more efficient methods of treatment monitoring and tracking skill acquisition. Further studies must focus on the developmental trajectories of young children with ASD into adulthood so researchers can better understand the disorder itself and validate the use of early intervention practices.

SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?

The implications for policymakers (state mental health authorities, legislators, insurance companies) are great, as researchers develop more evidence-based practices for those with ASDs. The implication for the clients and their families is that there will be effective treatment and rehabilitation interventions that must be advocated for.

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KEYWORDS: INTENSIVE BEHAVIORAL TREATMENT; SELF-INJURY; CHILDREN; AGE; VALIDITY; SKILLS; TIME; RELIABILITY; DEPRESSION; DIAGNOSIS.



[back to top](#)

2009 : June 2009 - Fast Breaking Papers : Johnny L. Matson