

COMPASS Information Series: Elements of Effective Programs for Young Children with Autism

As part of the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center sponsored Forum on Autism Spectrum Disorders (1997-2001) a group of representatives from model programs reached consensus on core elements of effective programs. These have been published in various formats since they were formulated.

Program Element	Brief Definition
Earliest Possible Start to Intervention	Children receive services appropriate to their needs as soon as they are identified as having ASD.
Individualization of Services for Children and Families	Adjustments to goals, intervention strategies, and evaluation criteria are made for each child and family receiving services, determined by the child's needs, strengths, and interests and the families concerns, priorities, and resources.
Systematic, Planned Teaching	Instruction or intervention that is carefully thought out, logical, and consistent with a conceptual or theoretical basis and involves planning, implementing, and assessing, intervention steps; each step is intentional, coordinated with an overall approach, and builds toward meaningful goals.
Specialized Curriculum	A core curriculum to address specific needs of children with ASD, includes these key areas: attending to elements of the environment, imitating others, language comprehension, use of language, playing appropriately with toys and interacting socially with others.
Intensity of Engagement	Engagement refers to the amount of time a child is attending to and actively participating in the social and nonsocial environment. Intensity of engagement is sometimes expressed as the percent of enrolled time that is spent in teaching interactions, or in activities in which the child is actively learning. The time that a child is engaged in learning opportunities may occur during program time and in home or community settings.
Family Involvement	Includes family involvement in their own child's program; services provided to families primarily because their child has ASD; services provided to families that are not directly related to ASD but may impact on overall family functioning; family support and networking; and family involvement in the overall program.
Program Elements That Are Part of Some, But Not All Programs	
Structured Environments	Arranging the environment, instructional materials, and teaching interactions to elicit, facilitate, or support specific skill attainment or development, including the use of environmental arrangements or visual cues to organize or schedule activities, to facilitate choices, and to define work, play, or rest spaces.
Developmentally Appropriate Practices	Practices that have been designed for all young children; programs are guided by information about child development and learning, each individual child's strengths, needs, preferences, and knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live.
Intervention in Setting with Typical Children or in Natural Environments	Some or all interventions occur in settings with typical children. This may include fully integrated settings in childcare, preschools, recreation activities, and other supports in home and community.

Additionally the National Research Council's Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism (2001) as reported in *Educating Children with Autism*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press (available on-line at www.nap.edu/books) states:

- **Active engagement** in intensive instructional programming should be provided for a minimum of an equivalent of a full school day for 5 days a week (**minimum of 25 hours per week**), including full year programming depending on the child's chronological and developmental age.
- Teaching opportunities should be planned, repeated, and generally organized into brief periods of time for very young children (15 – 20 minute intervals), with sufficient amounts of adult attention in one to one and very small group instruction in order to meet individual goals.
- There should be no more than two young children with ASD per adult in a classroom.
- There should be mechanisms for ongoing assessment and program evaluation that are conducted in order to measure child progress and make adjustments in programming.

Dawson and Osterling (1997) in a chapter, Early Intervention in Autism from Guralnick: *Early Intervention*, Brookes Publishing adds:

- There needs to be a functional approach to behavior where the purpose of the behavior is understood and the necessary skills to replace the behavior is taught.
- Transition planning and implementation is important for future success.

There are many theories and approaches to early intervention for children with ASD, but there is agreement that it needs to be collaborative, able to be generalized to natural environments, and be family centered. Further, effective intervention appears to be relatively intense, intrusive and interactional, requiring adaptations from both the child and other's in the child's environment (Bristol & Schopler, 1993). It's important that families and the people providing services have accurate, current information about autism and understand the child's individual needs, then translate these into individually appropriate strategies. Some of the debate in early childhood education for children with ASD stems from attempts to mesh strategies that are teacher directed and behaviorally defined with programs that are child centered and teacher facilitated where the environment provides much of the structure. Most children benefit from a combination of approaches and need consistency across therapist, teachers, caregivers, parents, and all who teach and interact with them daily. Children with autism are diverse and more information is needed about what works with each child. It's essential to continually assess needs and progress in a collaborative way so that the changing needs of the child are met. This requires good data keeping through a variety of means, then data interpretation to make adjustments.

Bristol, M. & Schopler, E. (1993). Introduction to preschool issues in autism. In E. Schopler, M. VanBourgondien, & M. Bristol (Eds.), *Preschool Issues in Autism*, (pp. 1-16). New York: Plenum Press.

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