



Autism Therapies

Autism Therapies: What Works?

There are many kinds of autism therapy. Some therapies are based on high quality scientific data, so they are more likely to help children learn. Here are some examples:

Type of Therapy	Sample Language for Describing the Therapy to Families	Example Programs
Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)	Understanding what happens just before and just after a child's behavior helps adults know how to respond. For example, if a child gets a reward every time they do something, they are more likely to repeat it.	General ABA programs Pivotal Response Training* Discrete Trial Teaching Early Start Denver Model*
Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Approaches ⁵⁶	Intervention focusing on techniques to increase motivation and performance (child-preferred activities in the natural environment, incidental teaching, consideration of developmental prerequisites). Informed by ABA methods.	Early Start Denver Model* Pivotal Response Training* Early Achievements Program Joint Attention Symbolic Play Engagement and Regulation (JASPER)* Project IMPACT*
Developmental Approaches	Focus on improving certain skills, like motor, communication, or daily living skills, in a way that is appropriate for the child's age and level of development.	Speech/language therapy Occupational therapy Physical therapy
Educational Approaches	Deliberate modifications to the classroom environment, materials, demands, and instruction to accommodate needs of autistic students with weaknesses in social learning and promote new skill/content acquisition	Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children (TEACCH)
Social Approaches	Teaching children what to expect in social situations can help improve relationships and reduce stress.	Social Stories Social Thinking Social skills groups like PEERS
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Informed Interventions	Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all related. Helping a child see a new way of thinking about a situation can help them feel and act differently.	Facing Your Fears (for anxiety) Unstuck and On Target (for cognitive inflexibility)

⁵⁶ Schreibman L, Dawson G, Stahmer AC, Landa R, Rogers SJ, McGee GG, Kasari C, Ingersoll B, Kaiser AP, Bruinsma Y, McNerney E, Wetherby A, Halladay A. Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions: Empirically Validated Treatments for Autism Spectrum Disorder. J Autism Dev Disord. 2015 Aug;45(8):2411-28.



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Parent-Mediated Intervention	Parent training and coaching to provide consistent intervention for joint attention, social communication, and behaviors. Studied as a method for augmenting therapist-led interventions.	Hanen Research Units in Behavioral Intervention (RUBI) *See above for behavioral interventions with parent training components

Other therapies have not been studied in as much detail, so less is known about how well they work. Examples of these include the Developmental, Individual Differences, Relationship-Based model (also called "Floor time") and Relationship Development Intervention (RDI). Finally, there are many therapies that do not work, and might even be harmful. There is no medication to target the core traits of autism.

Where to find out more:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/treatment.html>

National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice: <https://ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/>

National Standards Project:

<https://asatonline.org/wp-content/uploads/asatdocuments/National-Standards-Project-Phase-2.pdf>