

## NEW STRATEGIES FOR THE TREATMENT OF AUTISM

Today, nearly ten times more children are being diagnosed with autism compared to 20 years ago. Associated with this trend has been a proliferation of intervention programs, including the popular Discrete Trial Training that provides children as much as 40 hours a week of one-to-one teaching and costs as much as \$60,000 a year. The reported success of such programs has led to a general consensus that highly structured and intense instruction is a necessary condition for the effective treatment of autism.

Recently, a research team at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences led by **Gerald Mahoney, Ph.D.**, the Verna Houck Motto Professor for Families and Communities, examined the impact of a newly developed intervention—Responsive Teaching (RT)—on 20 autistic, two and a half year old children. The intervention attempted to address the children’s developmental and social emotional needs by teaching parents strategies to interact more responsively. Based on research reports indicating that responsiveness is a parenting quality that benefits the development of all children, RT encourages parents to incorporate these strategies in their daily routines: when they clothe or feed their children, play together, or whenever they communicate. In contrast to other interventions, RT discourages parents from engaging in prolonged instruction with children.

“After one year of weekly, one-hour intervention sessions with parents and children, we found that children made dramatic improvements in their rate of development. There was marked improvement in the children’s social emotional behavior, particularly related to their ability to regulate their emotions and engage in appropriate social interactions,” notes Dr. Mahoney. The improvements that RT produced were at least comparable, if not superior to, the improvements that autistic children have made using more intensive interventions. And, these improvements were attained at a cost of \$5,000 per year, approximately one tenth the cost of interventions such as the Discrete Trial Training.

The Mandel School is known for its research into the causes and effects of emotional and developmental disabilities in young children. It has taken a major step towards integrating research with “hands on” clinical treatment methods by establishing the Center on Intervention for Children and Families that includes state-of-the-art facilities for allowing students to observe, as well as learn to conduct interventions to help parents interact more effectively with such problems. Dr. Mahoney, co-director of the Center, adds that parents can come here to learn RT strategies.

<http://msass.case.edu/childrenandfamilies>



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