

# ASD—Developmental and Behavioral Supports and Services

Developmental and behavioral supports and services are the mainstay for educating and supporting people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about these supports and services.

**Developmental-based supports and services** tend to focus on the basic building blocks of motor, visual, and hearing processing; ordering or arranging; attention; problem-solving; communication; and social skills. This type of support may be most effective for some children if done in a play setting where an adult helps the child build skills through engagement. For children with ASD, strengthening communication and social skills often helps decrease concerning behaviors. Alternative and augmentative communication aids, such as picture cards, may be useful in the development of communication skills.

**Behavioral-based supports and services** focus on supporting the child in developing new skills to support social relationships and learning. Behavioral-based programs that are tailored to teach children the skills needed for play and communication can take place in the classroom or individualized settings. When language and social skills are lacking, challenging behaviors are often the child's only means of communicating their needs or fears to others. While behavioral supports and services may be used to decrease challenging behaviors, they are also used to teach children things we want them to learn how to do. There are several different types of behavioral supports and services.

Behavioral strategies may be directed by a therapist or teacher by prompting the child toward an intended goal. The therapy can also be incidental, such as when the child is caught attempting a desired task and the adult helps the child accomplish it. The goal of the behavioral approach is to teach new skills through reinforcement. These goals may be to advance developmental skills or to substitute appropriate ways of reacting to challenging situations. Other general strategies include providing an overall structured learning environment for children with routines that support them in their daily activities. Behavioral concerns may be reduced when children are both told ahead of time that a routine may change and taught how to prepare for the change.

## Functional Behavioral Analysis

Regardless of the strategy chosen, if a behavior is preventing developmental or educational progress, then it is often helpful to begin with functional behavioral analysis (FBA). FBA consists of identifying the events that lead up to the behavior and the consequences that maintain it. Sometimes this information is readily obtained by carefully observing children in their natural settings with their usual caregivers. Other times a trained behavior specialist must be consulted. The behavior may be an effort to communicate the urge to escape, the need for some tangible object (like food or a toy), or discomfort from too much or too little sensory stimulation.

Once all causes of the problematic behavior are identified, the specialist will determine which caregiver reactions are promoting (reinforcing) the behavior. With FBA information, the behavior specialist will develop a strategy to avoid or modify these conditions to help change the behavior. Finally, positive reinforcers that will aid in maintaining behaviors that are more appropriate and desired will be identified. This behavior plan needs to be evaluated and modified on an ongoing basis as children mature. Data should

be collected regarding the child's progress in behavioral changes to determine the effectiveness of the plan and to make changes when necessary.

Here are several behavioral approaches that are often used for children with ASD.

- University of North Carolina TEACCH Autism Program is one of the oldest and most widely used programs in schools. The program focuses on individualized assessment and intervention and encourages parents and professionals to work closely together. Parents and teachers are taught how to develop structured teaching programs that emphasize improving the child's learning strengths and functional communication. The program spans from preschool to adulthood. Read more about TEACCH at <https://teacch.com>.
- Applied behavior analysis (ABA) strategies are not unique to ASD, but ABA-based programs have been used extensively and have been successful for children with ASD. In ABA programs, specific goals are set and the therapist works intensively with the child, one-on-one and one goal at a time. ABA has been found to improve functional skills and reduce challenging behaviors. Various programs have been created around the theme of ABA, such as discrete trial training (DTT), pivotal response treatment (PRT), functional communication training (FCT), and verbal behavior therapy, also known as applied verbal behavior (AVB).
- The Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based (DIR) Model, also known as Floortime, was developed to provide a framework for families and therapists to help a child master communication and play in natural settings by building on the child's unique skills and interests. It focuses on interactional experiences that include sensation, movement, and relationships, as well as communication. Unlike many other behavioral approaches, the interaction often follows the interests and lead of the child. Floortime strategies are used to help the child learn to engage in interaction, play, and communication. Variations on developmental approaches are also practiced.
- Combined treatment programs are another approach. Researchers are examining how to best combine supports and services to meet the needs of families and their young children with ASD. The Early Start Denver Model provides a combination of developmental and behavioral approaches to address the basic core symptoms of ASD in young children, first at home and then in a structured preschool. Core features of the Denver model include involvement of an interdisciplinary team to implement a developmental curriculum, focus on interpersonal engagement, development of spontaneous and reciprocal imitation and object use, focus on cognitive aspects of play, and partnering with parents. While the exact approach used in the research may not be available, some preschool programs may incorporate many of the elements that were studied.

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Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics patient education booklet, *Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*.

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