

Interventions in Autism Spectrum Disorders: Translating Science into Practice

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The world of autism interventions can seem a confusing place to family members, teachers and researchers alike. A bewildering number of interventions are available, and making sense of the claims of their proponents, and the evidence base supporting them, can be difficult. This timely and extremely useful book provides an overview of a wide range of intervention models currently in use. The book has a strong North American focus, but as many approaches used worldwide have a US origin, this is not a major issue.

The book is split into three separate sections. Four chapters focus on what the editors refer to as 'comprehensive programmes'. Two of these – the Early Start Denver Model and the Center for Autism and Related Disorders model – are little known outside the USA. By contrast, the University of North Carolina's Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication-handicapped Children and Adults (TEACCH) model is widely used across the world; and the Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS) is also gaining currency throughout the UK and elsewhere. The chapter on the TEACCH approach helpfully clearly locates 'structured teaching' and the 'culture of autism' within what we currently know of the psychology and neurology of autism, and a much-needed overview of research and empirical evidence for the approach is provided. The chapter on the SCERTS approach is less an analysis and more a description – nonetheless a broad overview of the approach in 20 pages is extremely helpful, and this will be a much-read and cited chapter.

These four chapters are followed by a long section focused on specific issues, such as social competence, self-regulation, management of repetitive behaviours and sensory issues and social emotional reciprocity. Within each chapter, the authors identify the range of approaches currently in use and discuss the evidence base to support them. All of the approaches one would expect to find are discussed – Picture Exchange Communication System, Social Stories Applied Behavior Analysis, Pivotal Response Training, the use of peer buddies and other approaches – and the chapters helpfully synthesise current understanding in each area.

To my mind however, the most interesting and thought-provoking chapters come at the start of the book, where a foundation for understanding and considering approaches is provided. The discussion regarding treatment integrity, and how closely 'real-world' practice aligns with the models intended by their developers, raised a number of very real issues. This chapter acknowledges that adapting programmes for use in schools and other settings often requires 'protocol flexibility' to meet individual needs; and it lays the responsibility for identifying the level of flexibility inherent in the approach on those developing the protocols. Having read too many articles where practitioners are criticised for 'doing the approach wrong', I found this heartening. Staff training and competence, therapist drift and other variables inherent in interactive interventions are also discussed; and helpful actions that can increase treatment integrity within 'the real world' are suggested.

The book is not without its limitations. As is made clear within the editors' chapter on evaluation of effectiveness, evidence is throughout understood as meaning quantitative evidence, and data are quantitative data. Therefore, this is the only type of research evidence considered throughout

the book. Although vital in identifying what works, such data really only tell part of the story. Moreover, relationship-based approaches with a more qualitative research base – such as floor time and intensive interaction – are not discussed at all. Despite these omissions, however, I would unhesitatingly recommend this book to any practitioner or researcher seeking an overview of the current state of the art regarding autism interventions.