Interventions based on early intensive applied behaviour analysis for autistic children: a systematic review and cost-effectiveness analysis

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Plain English summary

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Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how people understand the world and interact with others. Early intensive applied behaviour analysis-based interventions are an approach designed to help young (preschool) autistic children. This approach is often delivered on a one-to-one basis, for 20–50 hours per week, over a period of several years.

This project obtained and analysed the original data from studies of early intensive applied behaviour analysis-based interventions, to determine whether or not these interventions are beneficial. It also investigated whether or not the interventions represent good value for money.

The results suggest that early intensive applied behaviour analysis-based interventions may improve children’s intelligence, communication, social and life skills more than standard approaches. However, some results could be inaccurate or incorrect, and there was no evidence about other important outcomes, such as the severity of autism and where children went to school. Most studies lasted for around 2 years, which means that it is not known if early intensive applied behaviour analysis-based interventions have meaningful long-term benefits.

It was not possible to fully assess whether or not these interventions provided value for money, as the benefits of early intensive applied behaviour analysis-based interventions were unclear, although the available evidence suggested that they did not. Early intensive applied behaviour analysis-based interventions may, however, provide value for money if their effects were to last into adulthood, or if receiving early intensive applied behaviour analysis had a large impact on the type of school children attended.

Future studies of early interventions may be helpful, but should consider looking at which components of early applied behaviour analysis-based interventions are the most important, rather than at whether or not they work better than other interventions. Future studies should also follow best current research practice and evaluate outcomes that matter to autistic people and their families.
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This report

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