

Treatment Efficacy Summary



AMERICAN
SPEECH-LANGUAGE
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Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that impairs an individual's ability to process and integrate ordinary information. It is characterized by speech, language, and communication impairments. Autism and autism spectrum disorders (ASD)—including Asperger disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, Rett disorder, and childhood disintegrative disorder—affect an individual's social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and cognitive abilities. The incidence rate is approximately 1 out of every 250 births (National Institutes of Health, 2001).

Autism is treatable, with speech-language pathology services used to improve communication. Clinical evidence indicates that children and adults with ASD benefit from assessment and intervention services provided by speech-language pathologists. Effective interventions for children with ASD are characterized by early intervention, intensive instruction, and individualized objectives.ⁱ Empirical studies evaluating speech and language intervention procedures have documented the effectiveness of behavioral and naturalistic teaching strategies to target specific language outcomes, replace challenging behavior, and promote social interactions.ⁱⁱ Comprehensive programs for individuals with ASD draw on the expertise of speech-language pathologists to prioritize intervention objectives and coordinate planning for communicative success.

According to data from ASHA's National Outcomes Measurement System (NOMS), two thirds of preschoolers with ASD showed gains of one or more levels on the Spoken Language Production Functional Communication Measure (FCM) following speech-language pathology intervention. FCMs are a series of seven-point rating scales ranging from least functional (Level 1) to most functional (Level 7) designed to measure improvement in a variety of clinical areas. Similar gains were also seen in two other frequently treated areas—spoken language comprehension and pragmatics with 72% and 63% of children achieving one or more levels of progress respectively. Furthermore, NOMS data reveal that children who made functional gains in these areas received approximately 2–5 times more intervention (depending on the disorder being treated) than children who did not.

Speech-language pathologists assist in the assessment and management of clients with ASD via a number of avenues. They serve on interdisciplinary teams to conduct evaluations. They work with individuals with ASD to treat specific speech and language deficits, notably impairments in motor speech, semantics, and pragmatics (a person's use and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal language in social interactions). For non-speaking individuals, speech-language pathologists design augmentative and alternative communication systems.

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ⁱ National Research Council (2001). *Educating children with autism*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

ⁱⁱ Goldstein, H. (2002). Communication intervention for children with autism: A review of treatment efficacy. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 32, 373–396.