



A NOVEL APPROACH TO EARLY INTERVENTION

Carrie Susa Woodward, M.S., B.C.B.A.

One of the core features of an autism diagnosis is a deficit in social interaction and social communication. These deficits can be wide-ranging and vary in severity from person to person. However, a core characteristic that most autistic people share is a lack of eye contact. In general, those with autism spend less time than their neurotypical counterparts looking at people.

The Evolution of Treatment Approaches

When I started my career in the autism field over two decades ago, approaches to treatment were very different than they are now. Historically, traits identified as uniquely autistic, such as avoiding eye contact, were targeted for treatment with the goal of helping autistic people be more indistinguishable from their peers or to appear less autistic. There were programs devoted to teaching autistic children to make eye contact when they were called by name or when cued by such phrases as “Look at me.” However, these programs worked to bring eye contact under instructional control, which means autistic individuals would only look at people or make eye contact when directed to do so. As autistic children grew older and their communication skills developed, they began sharing their lived experiences. Many autistic adults have shared how uncomfortable, difficult and awkward it can be to make eye contact and look at people, and how it can even trigger anxiety. As with any scientific approach, the field of behavior analysis began to evolve, to do better at incorporating the autistic perspective, and to move largely away from teaching or shaping eye contact at all. The autistic community breathed a loud sigh of relief and behavior analysts patted themselves on the back for leaving behind archaic teaching strategies when they offered no benefit to the autistic person. It is worth asking, however, if there truly is no benefit for an autistic person to look more often at people.

The Science of Social Observation

In neurotypical childhood development, babies spend a lot of time looking at people beginning in infancy. Through infant research studies, we have learned that autistic infants spend significantly less time looking at people than neurotypical ones, and that they are more drawn to looking at objects.¹ This is not just a harmless quirk of autism, but actually inhibits autistic children from learning in their natural environment. Most learning in the earliest phases of life comes from observing people around us and imitating what we see. If autistic children don't spend enough time looking at people, they are missing out on one of the most powerful forms of learning.

Early Intervention and the Brain

From birth to the age of three years old, a child's brain is in a highly adaptable phase. This is often described by experts as a period of high plasticity, which means the brain is exceptionally good at making new connections. These connections in the brain are established through experiences. Each behavior-environment interaction is a new connection, and the connection becomes stronger when such interactions are repeated. Of course, the brain is still actively making new connections and eliminating the unhelpful or unnecessary connections after the age of three, but it can take longer and require more repetitions since the brain is no longer at peak plasticity. This is why early intervention has proven to be so valuable in supporting an autistic child's progress. It takes advantage of the neural plasticity during the first three years of life in order to help shape the most important and adaptable connections. If practitioners largely abandon any treatment related to eye contact, it is worth asking if they are making the most efficient and effective use of this time of powerful learning.



I believe that there is a way to continue to honor the autistic perspective on forced eye contact or eye contact under instructional control while addressing the underlying core issues related to natural observational learning. If we can teach autistic children how to learn naturally by observation and imitation, we can move away from teaching individual skill after individual skill.

The Role of Reinforcers

Each of us spends considerable time looking at things that function as reinforcers. A reinforcer is a stimulus or event that strengthens the behavior that precedes it. Since autistic people look less frequently at people, social consequences generally don't serve as powerful reinforcers for them. They do, however, spend a lot of time looking at things that function as reinforcers for them. For example, autistic children may spend hours watching wheels spin, trains roll around a track, or the same favorite scene in a movie over and over again. However, science-backed strategies can effectively condition non-reinforcing things to begin functioning as reinforcers over time. If you are the parent of an autistic child, you've likely seen reinforcer conditioning programs that pair a token, or non-reinforcer, with a piece of candy, or reinforcer. Over time, this approach transfers the reinforcing qualities to the token so that it begins to function as a reinforcer. Reinforcers strengthen behavior and are important in the conversation about consequences, but we also look at reinforcers more often. We can use the same strategy to pair people, faces and social interaction with established reinforcers. These social stimuli begin to function as reinforcers for autistic children, thus naturally drawing their attention and gaze more frequently.

The Need for Parent-Led Intervention

Given the developmental need to look at people, the rapid neural expansion in the first three years of life and the ability of non-reinforcing things like people and faces to become reinforcers through conditioning, it is clear that every autistic child should have the opportunity for early intervention before age three. It should focus on building value in people and in social interaction so that autistic children are naturally more drawn to look at people and can begin learning through imitation. The most recent diagnostic statistics tell us that one in 36 children will be autistic, and that the rate of provider growth is lagging behind. Waitlists for treatment can extend from months to years depending on where a child lives. Parents find it particularly challenging to provide the best chance of success to their child if they miss the early intervention window altogether.

There is a need to embrace the idea of parent-led early intervention and to disseminate strategies for parents to begin using immediately. Research demonstrates that such interventions can be just as beneficial as those led by practitioners.^{2,3} At the same time, they allow parents to take control of their child's future rather than wait for practitioners to become available. Much of the early intervention benefits can be achieved by modifying normal everyday interactions. Rather than feeling intimidated or overwhelmed, parents should instead feel empowered to navigate their child's autism journey in the most beneficial way possible.

Dispelling the Fear of Parent-Led Intervention

One of the biggest concerns that parents share with me is the fear of being overwhelmed by adding yet another task to their never-ending list. Some parents will say, "I have to be her therapist and her mom?" While such fears are legitimate, they quickly fade as parents learn exactly what they are supposed to do in a parent-led program. The philosophy behind naturalistic early intervention strategies is that normal play and daily routines become the therapeutic backdrop. Parents and caregivers likely play with their young autistic children multiple times throughout the day. With a little training, parents can learn different strategies for play that start to bring value to people and faces. For example, when parents read a favorite book for a child, they learn that sitting across from the child provides more face-to-face opportunities than having the child sit in their lap faced away from them. Building on that, parents then learn how to build motivation during book reading; as they approach the next fun or exciting part of the book, they simply pause and allow the child an opportunity to find the parent's face, which becomes the key to unlocking the door to the fun part.



Parent: "Polar bear, polar bear, what do you hear? I hear a..."

The child looks to find the parent's face in anticipation of the next part.

Parent: "Lion roaring in my ear"

The parent then growls and tickles the child who laughs and is motivated to move to the next page.

This simple and seemingly mundane parent-child interaction provides many valuable learning opportunities. It creates natural motivation by inserting pauses before fun parts. Parents do not instruct, force or prompt a child to look at them, but instead establish value in the face by making it the ticket to fun. The exciting part is reinforcing, and the shared experience is pleasurable for the child. The parent becomes an integral part of the fun. The parent elevates the experience since the book may not be as enjoyable alone.

Finding Parent-Led Programs

The beauty of this naturalistic, parent-led early intervention approach is that it can begin when children are very young, perhaps even before a formal diagnosis is received. This allows for the most time within the period of peak brain plasticity. How can a parent begin the process? As the research into parent-led early intervention is still in its infancy, it unfortunately is not as widely available as practitioner-led treatment. Key search terms to use would include "parent-led autism treatment," "parent-led intervention," and "naturalistic developmental behavioral intervention." There are agencies that provide one-on-one training to parents, such as the Early Start Denver Model, as well as agencies that provide self-paced virtual training to parents, such as Autism Jumpstart. Parents should evaluate the different options and make a selection based on what is the best fit for their family.

Every child, family and learning style is different. The end goal, however, remains the same for everyone: give autistic children the best possible chance of success on their journey of life!

References

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Carrie Susa Woodward, M.S., B.C.B.A., is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, the founder of Autism Jumpstart, and the creator of the unique parent-led early intervention program, "Jumpstart the Journey."

She began her work in the world of autism in 2002 at Pepperdine University, where the blend of scientific strategies and personal interactions with families sparked a lifelong dedication to the autism field. With over two decades of experience, she has not only worked hands-on with hundreds of families navigating autism, but has also contributed valuable research to the scientific journal [The Analysis of Verbal Behavior \(TAVB\)](#).

A personal transition in 2022 led Carrie toward a focus on her own family, while a close friend's struggle with the complexities of autism diagnosis and treatment reminded her of the urgent need for early intervention. This was the impetus behind "Jumpstart the Journey."

The "Jumpstart the Journey" course gives parents practical, science-backed strategies that can be applied during the critical waiting period for professional help, reassuring them of their ability to positively influence their child's development. Carrie's works echo the sentiment that, with proper guidance, every family's autism journey can lead to progress and hope.

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