



## **Early Intervention infoSheet**

The educational needs of children with ASD vary greatly. Experts and professionals agree that intensive, specialized early intervention programs are highly desirable for young children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Treatments fall into three broad categories:

Behavioural and Communication Approaches

Dietary and Biomedical Approaches

Complementary Approaches

### ***Behavioural and Communication Approaches***

The behaviours exhibited and the communication impairments are often the most frustrating areas for parents to deal with. Many treatment approaches have been developed in order to address these areas of behaviour and communication difficulties. Examples are: Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), TEACCH (Treatment and education of autistic and related communication handicapped children), PECS (Picture Exchange Communication Systems), Floor Time, Social Stories, Positive Behavioural Interventions and Support (PBS), SPELL (Structure, Positive, Empathetic, Low arousal, Links), Auditory Integration Therapy (AIT) and Sensory Integration.. These may be addressed within an Individualised Education Program (IEP), which is tailored toward the needs of the individual child.

### ***Dietary and Biomedical Approaches***

No drug, nutritional supplement or special diet is known to correct the underlying neurological problems found in Autism.

Some drugs have been found to be helpful for people with Autism who also have hyperactivity, irritability, anxiety and impulsiveness. There is a range of anti-depressant, sedative, stimulant and anti-psychotic drugs that have been used to treat people with Autism. Some have been investigated through specific drug trials – all have potential side effects.

There have been many claims that vitamin and mineral supplements may improve the symptoms of Autism. There is not wide agreement about whether studies have scientifically proven that minerals and supplements actually work however there is anecdotal evidence that various combination approaches may assist with improved concentration and decreased behavioural problems. The most widely

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used supplement is Vitamin B with Vitamins A, C and D also used commonly.

Some people with Autism exhibit intolerances or allergies to certain foods; they may have digestive problems, malabsorption or hyperactivity. These are not causes of Autism but may co-exist. There is anecdotal support for trying a gluten and casein free diet.

### *Complementary Approaches*

Complementary therapies include music, art, animal therapy, sensory garden therapy and interactions that provide the opportunity to develop a tactile, auditory or co-ordination experience. These may have both emotional and physical benefits enhancing general well-being.

Due to the severe lack of funding of early intervention services for children with an ASD in Australia, parents face a somewhat limited choice for centre based programs. Early intervention services are aimed at children from 0 – 6 years. Centre based programs are limited and also have long waiting lists.

Contact autism organizations in your state or region that should be able to provide you with lists of centres in your area. It is a good idea to talk to other parents about their experiences of the programs you are considering. Visit the centres and ask lots of questions about how they can address your child's and family's needs. Questions to ask may be? *Do you assign a person to be my child's case co-ordinator?; What is your discipline policy, how do you address undesirable behaviours?; What are your staff ratios?* and so on. Find out about how the program is broken down, and what methods they use. Is there autism-specific psychology and/or speech pathology time within the program (most centres employ a speech pathologist)? Find out everything you can about the program.

Things to consider when deciding about early intervention:

- Listen to the professionals and gather all the information that you can. Become well informed about your options and choices.
- Consider the risks and likely benefits as well as costs, in both the short term and the longer term.
- Consider your options. Waiting lists are usually long — can you initiate other strategies whilst waiting eg speech pathology, play therapy, hydrotherapy etc.
- Weigh up the financial and emotional costs to your family. Your family is the nucleus of your child's world –the decisions you make impact on the family. Decide carefully whether your family can commit to an intervention before starting.