TELEHEALTH INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD

Given the growing number of children with ASD requiring intensive early intervention services, an increase of accessible evidence-based interventions is also imperative. For various reasons, we have not seen an equal growth of services to match this increasing need.

Telehealth programs have the potential to make evidence-based interventions for autism more widely available to both professionals and families. Barriers such as accessibility of training, lack of trained providers, financial burdens, time demands, lack of reliable transportation, and lack of child care are minimized with distance learning programs.

There are now a number of internet-based training programs that are designed to teach parents and professional evidence-based interventions. Several online programs that require a paid subscription include: RethinkAutism: rethinkautism.com, AutismPro: autismpro.com, Advanced Training Solutions: advancedtrainingsolutions.com, and Skills for Autism by the Center for Autism and Related Disorders: skillsforautism.com.

In addition, several programs are provided over the Internet free of charge, including Autism Distance Education Parent Training (ADEPT), offered through UC Davis’s M.I.N.D. Institute ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/ddcenter/EDD_outproducts.html, and the Autism Internet Modules (AIM), offered through the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence Disabilities (OCALI) autisminternetmodules.org.

Although there is great potential for telehealth programs to increase access to intervention, it is a new field, and there is limited information on the optimal methods for providing parent and professional training via telehealth. Both self-directed and therapist-assisted programs have shown promise. More research on the comparative benefits of these two delivery models as well as information on which individuals benefit most from each will help guide the development of more effective telehealth training programs, and help tailor these programs to the individual needs of the user.
RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Qualitative Evaluation of Telehealth-Based Parent Training

We have recently completed enrolling families in our DOD-funded study on the feasibility of using telehealth to provide parent training for families of children with ASD. The project supported the development and initial evaluation of a self-directed and therapist-assisted version of our Project ImPACT parent training program, called ImPACT Online.

As part of our evaluation of the ImPACT Online program, we wanted to gain a better understanding of participating parents’ experiences with the program, and whether these experiences differed for parents who received coaching, versus those parents who completed the program on their own. In order to examine parents’ experiences across the two groups, we interviewed 10 parents immediately after they completed the ImPACT Online program. In general, parents in both groups (i.e., those who were coached versus those who were not) reported having a positive experience in the program. Critically, nearly all parents reported that they saw social communication gains when they used the techniques with their child. One parent who was coached reported:

“The intervention techniques, they worked with him, my son. There was a lot growth for him with some of the different techniques that helped him, especially withholding some things. He learned if you don’t do this you’re not getting this, and he learned a lot quicker through using these techniques than anything else I’ve tried.”

As noted, parents who did not receive coaching reported similar gains. For example, one parent in the self-directed group noted:

“He makes a lot more eye contact and he looks to us for response like if he was trying to show us something more, and then he started playing better with his brother and that kind of thing.”

Finally, parents in both groups of the ImPACT Online program emphasized that the earlier that they could learn about the intervention, the better. Many reported that having access to a program near the time of diagnosis would be beneficial and might help parents feel empowered:

“I would recommend [learning about Project ImPACT] early on like we did. I think it helped, I felt like I was doing something. I was googling MSU autism and found the lab and found the study. So thrilled when we were accepted into the study. I wanted to do something. Do something more than reading and stuff like that. I was already going to the library and checking out all the books I could. So yeah I think at the beginning I felt really fortunate that we found you guys early on. I feel like it would be beneficial and at any point but especially in the beginning. Gave me a feeling of purpose.”

We are continuing to analyze our quantitative data for this project which will provide information on parent learning and self-efficacy.
RESEARCH PROJECTS

NEW STUDY: Comparative Efficacy of Self-Directed and Therapist-Assisted Telehealth Parent Training

The MSU Autism Lab recently received a grant from the USHHS HRSA/MCHB to conduct a full-scale comparative efficacy trial of the self-directed and therapist-assisted telehealth versions of our ImPACT Online Program. ImPACT Online teaches parents evidence-based intervention techniques to use at home in play and routines to increase their child’s social communication skills.

Parents of children with ASD between the ages of 18 and 72 months will be randomly assigned to the self-directed program, the therapist-assisted program, or a web-based support and information program. All families will receive their program for 4 months, and will be followed for an additional 3 months after they complete their program. Participation is free and all required software and hardware will be provided at no cost. Study enrollment will begin in January 2015.

Feasibility of ImPACT Online

We are also conducting an open enrollment evaluation of the self-directed version of ImPACT Online that is open to families of children with ASD and related difficulties who live more than 3 hours from the MSU Autism Lab.

UPCOMING PROJECTS

Improving the Delivery of Project ImPACT Within Community Settings.

We are interested in better understanding the variables that impact parents’ and providers’ use of parent training within a Medicaid-eligible setting. By doing so, we are hoping to create better models of service delivery within community settings. Given this interest, we are recruiting: 1) parents of a child with a current ASD diagnosis between the ages of 18 months and 8 years who are Medicaid-eligible based on family income; 2) providers who provide intervention services to Medicaid-eligible children with an ASD diagnosis. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to attend a one-hour, video-based informational presentation about the Project ImPACT parent-training program. Following the presentation, you will be asked to participate in a group interview with 4-6 other parents or providers. Group interviews will take approximately one hour, and will ask about your opinion of the Project ImPACT parent-training intervention. You will be compensated $50 for participation. Your participation will take approximately 2.5 hours. Lunch and child care will be provided during your participation. If you are interested in participating in the study, or would like more information about the study, please contact Katherine
FAMILY TIDBITS
Updates from our families

Vincent, 5 years-old
Because of recent events in our life I decided it was time to be a stay at home mom. My son Vincent, age 5, is now meeting and even starting to exceed his goals in the classroom for November already! It may have been the best decision for our family in years! Also babysitting other children so he hears constant speech seems to help him pick up on words and phrases quicker. He is mostly non-verbal but has picked up and retained many new words and phrases and continues to surprise us every day. A new, smaller classroom setup has also helped! We would be lost without his teacher and aides! **Wonderful Job Vincent!**

Salar, 6 years-old
Salar is doing well in kindergarten. He enjoys the company of other kids very much! **So happy you are having a good Kindergarten year Salar!**

Emily, 9 years-old
Emily was on her school’s cheerleading squad. **Amazing Emily! Good for you!**

Talan, 9 years-old
Talan joined the WMSHA (West Michigan special hockey association). He never skated before so I was a little nervous. After two practices Talan is ice skating on his own and learning to play hockey! – Mom says “we are so proud of his kind, loving character” **We are proud of you too, Talan!**

Dominic, 10 years-old
Spontaneous speech is something that we are constantly working on with Dominic. Since he didn’t talk much until after age 3, a spontaneous sentence of just a few words is cause for celebration. Dominic’s class is going to the local high school to listen to the marching band play their music this morning. He told me, “I am going on a field trip on a school bus to see the marching band!” I was so proud and happy for him, because I think that is the longest sentence I’ve ever heard him say - 16 words - unprompted!! He also told me this morning, "mommy is a lady and mommy is a mother!" **Keep up the great work Dominic!**

Thank you to all of the families who contributed stories for the Newsletter. We love reading them!