

Three Important Things to Consider When Starting Intervention for a Child Diagnosed With Autism

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Do you understand the enormity of this undertaking?

Accepting responsibility for an Early and Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) program is accepting responsibility for a child's future. This is a serious undertaking. Great outcomes are possible with well-implemented EIBI programs (Matson & Smith, 2008) and frightening outcomes occur when they are not (Bibby, Eikeseth, Martin, Mudford, & Reeves, 2001). Every child is precious and has a right to live a safe life filled with opportunities, learning, care, and affection (United Nations, 1959). Furthermore, our ethical guidelines require that we provide effective treatment with informed consent (Behavior Analysis Certification Board, 2004). Skilled and ethical behavior throughout an EIBI program can help children access those rights, enabling them to have happy and productive childhoods, experience harmonious family life, and go on to become contributing members of society.

Because of the gravity of the consequences resulting from the quality of intervention, it is especially important that one tries to be aware of the contingencies operating on one's own behavior. Just a few of the troublesome contingencies that interfere with a quality EIBI program include taking on too many clients in an attempt to alleviate everyone's suffering and discomfort, taking on too many clients to increase income, reacting to momentary crises as opposed to proactive systematic and strategic planning, responding to the social attention of communities that value fads and structure (rather than data and function), and failing to take data because the time is not funded. Conversely, there are environmental arrangements that increase the likelihood of quality EIBI implementation. For example, consulting with trusted colleagues (Baily & Burch, 2005) and joining continuous learning communities (Ellis & Glenn, 1995) who will provide feedback and reinforce behavior that is in the best interests of the young children. Such communities will help identify dangerous contingencies and establish rules to prevent harmful behavior. Working for agencies with high standards and a record of good EIBI outcomes will also support quality. This type of analysis is important: A behavior analyst's self-management will affect children's futures.

Do you have the skills to do this?

EIBI is a highly specialized and difficult area of behavior analysis. One child's program usually involves hundreds of

individualized teaching programs, across many domains, over the course of two to three years. Within and across each of those programs, the behavior analyst must keep up with EIBI research evidence and engage in a complex series of decisions and problem solving. Although research reviews are periodically published (e.g., National Autism Center, 2009), we are in the effortful but fortunate situation of needing to keep up with constant developments in intervention procedures and this requires vigilance. In addition to knowledge and understanding of evidence-based practice, there is a large repertoire of professional skills required of a behavior analyst working in EIBI.

To successfully implement an EIBI program, a sophisticated orchestration is required that includes, but is not limited to, keeping abreast of research, conducting individualized assessments, deciding what programs to introduce when and how, monitoring and revising programs as needed, training and maintaining the teaching skills of all team members, supporting and working with families, collaborating with other professionals, managing resources, and problem solving at every level. The best and most successful EIBI programs have developed well-tuned and robust systems to address each of these factors to produce favorable outcomes (e.g., Harris & Handleman, 1994). Individuals implementing EIBI programs have the same responsibility to know the current research, demonstrate the intervention skills, create systems to support implementation, and to adjust at every level when necessary.

As an individual practitioner, you have three options; all involve your ability to assess your own skills and essentially "know what you don't know." A starting point for assessing your own skills is to review the *Consumer Guidelines for Identifying, Selecting, and Evaluating Behavior Analysts Working with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Autism SIG, 2007). Once you have evaluated your skill level, select from the following options:

Option 1: Provide services if you have the sophisticated skills required to successfully implement EIBI.

Option 2: If you do not have the skills, work in a setting where you can be mentored by a skilled and wise behavior analyst who does have those skills and who has produced good EIBI outcomes. With current technology, geography is no longer a barrier to supervision. Admittedly, the cost of supervision can be

burdensome, but that is not an excuse for unskilled and unsupervised behavior.

Option 3: If you do not have the skills and are not able to be supervised, please do not provide EIBI.

Do you know how to determine if progress is being made?

If you understand the responsibility and have the skills, you probably understand the third consideration: The skilled EIBI practitioner requires meaningful (as indicated by the discipline and stakeholders), multilayered (standardized, ecological, curricular, and collateral gains across domains) and multisource (across environments and informants) data sets in order to evaluate progress. These data systems should be designed so they are useful at the level of procedural and programmatic decision making. The procedural level involves assessing progress on individual skill goals and programmatic involves decisions about curricular placement, staffing, settings and formats. Additionally, the data should be summarized and analyzed in comparison with outcome data in EIBI so that at regular intervals, such as one-year evaluations, general directions can be considered.

Three Important Things to Consider After the First Year of Intervention

Did you honor this child's life with skills and wisdom?

After one year, your data should indicate an effective, socially-valid intervention program that produced changes comparable to those found in the EIBI literature. Your overall evaluations should tell you that the child's life is better for you having been involved; that you created an environment that was in keeping with EIBI research; that you successfully used your skills; and that your intervention, as evidenced by data and systematic evaluations, account for outcomes.

Does an outside expert reviewer agree with your assessment of progress?

After one year, it is wise to have an outside, independent reviewer evaluate the child's status and progress. Pick someone who is very well trained, effective, and honest. Remember, this is a child's life; you do not want a superficial seal of approval. You want genuine in-depth analysis and feedback. This would include systematic review of the data, observations of teaching interactions, review of video archives, and interviews with stakeholders. The expert should be able to tell you if your intervention is in alignment with advances in the EIBI research literature and evidence based practice; if your systems support intervention fidelity; and if the child made progress on meaningful goals in an efficient, acceptable manner. They should also be able to make recommendations regarding future directions.

What are the plans for the future?

Finally, it is useful to have a "futures" planning meeting within the context of the child's progress over the year and the expert reviewer's feedback (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). Some of the most critical decisions include issues related to communication modes, learn-to-learn programs, family needs, and educational placements. At this time, under your leadership, the team should review the data (skills learned, rates of acquisition, level of specialized programming and problem solving required, family functioning) and map the general directions and decision-making mechanisms for the coming year so that you can continue to provide an EIBI program that enhances the child's quality of life and brings promise of a good future.

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