

# EARLY INTERVENTION IN AUTISM: Forging the Architecture for Change

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# Why Early Intervention?

- “Critical window of opportunity” for children 0- 6 years of age
- Brain has high degree of plasticity
- Providing intensive intervention during these early years leads to a higher degree of independence and overall maximized outcomes

# Benefits of Early Intervention

- Statistics show that between 25 and 50% of children receiving intensive EI will move into general education by Kindergarten
- Many others will need significantly less service provision in future years

# Diagnosis: The First Step

- Researchers have all shown that autism can be reliably diagnosed by 18 months
- Many symptoms are present by 12 months of age
- Average age of diagnosis is 6 years for Caucasian children and even higher for children from minority backgrounds.

# Diagnosis: The First Step

- Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT) can reliably screen for the earliest warning signs
- Takes less than 5 minutes to administer
- Less than half of pediatricians surveyed in 2004 used screening tools, even after parents raise their initial concerns

# Diagnosis: The First Step

- Average time from parent's initial concern to full diagnosis is 4 years
- That is 4 years potentially spent without intervention
- Early screening can and does lead to early diagnosis
- Developmental screenings need to become mandatory

# Diagnosis: The First Step

- Currently no consistency in how a diagnostic evaluation is done
- “Best Practices” in diagnosis recommend Autism Diagnostic Inventory (ADI) & Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS)
- But most clinics, state agencies and even private practitioners do not use these tools

# Effective Early Intervention

- General consensus on the factors contributing most to program effectiveness
- Important: “ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL”
- Programming must be individualized & implemented in a flexible manner
- Entry into program should begin as soon as diagnosis is given



# Effective Early Intervention

## ➤ CA Best Practices:

- Based on current research & effective practices
- Uses a variety of methodologies & approaches
- Based on comprehensive assessment results
- Reflective of individual needs
- Outcome based
- Includes parents as part of multidisciplinary team

# Effective Early Intervention

- Most important factor is intensity
  - Time
  - Individualization of curriculum
  - Level of structure in the environment
- According to most “Best Practice Guidelines”- intervention should occur between 25 and 40 hours a week.

# Effective Early Intervention

- In a classroom setting, must have a low student to adult ratio (2:1 preferred)
- Curriculum should be behaviorally-based and developmentally sequenced
- Empirical evidence supports the use of Applied Behavior Analysis techniques:
  - Discrete Trial Training
  - Pivotal Response Training
  - Verbal Behavior
  - TEACCH

# Effective Early Intervention

- Includes incidental teaching techniques
- Teaching takes place in various environments to ensure generalization & maintenance of new skills
- Consistency across environments
- Designed to allow for transition to more independence

# Effective Early Intervention

- Data is recorded in all learning environments
- Structured, organized and distraction-free teaching areas
- Visual schedules of daily routine
  - Digital photographs
  - Generalized photographs
  - PECS icons

# Effective Early Intervention

- Incorporate motor development
  - Occupational Therapy
  - Sensory Integration Therapy
- Incorporate social skills instruction
  - Floortime (Developmental, Individual, Difference)
  - Relationship Development Inventory
  - Pretend and symbolic play skills

# Effective Early Intervention

- Language enriched environment
  - PECS
  - Whole Language Approach
  - Naturalistic Language Method
  - Hannon Method (More Than Words)
  - Sign
- Includes parent training and support

# Young Learners Preschool

- Highly specialized, comprehensive intensive preschool intervention program
- Goal is to return to mainstream environment for Kindergarten
- Children with all forms of ASD; 3 to 6 years old
- Six hours a day, five days a week
- Incorporates a wide range of strategies shown to have efficacy for children with ASD



# Young Learners Preschool

- Philosophy- “The child must not be made to fit the program, the program must be made to fit the child.”
- Teacher student ratios from 1:1 to 1:3
- Program begins with DTT to develop instructional control and intrinsic motivation
- Moves to a more naturalistic learning environment

# Young Learners Preschool

- Instruction begins 1:1 until the child is ready for dyad/group learning
- Children participate in circle, art and music
- All therapies are provided during the school day
  - Speech and Language
  - Occupation/Sensory Integration Therapy
  - Adaptive Physical Education

# Young Learners Preschool

- Initial instruction focuses on teaching
  - Compliance
  - Communication
  - Learning readiness
  - Social relatedness/emotional development
  - Elimination of maladaptive behaviors such as self-stimulation, self-abuse or aggression

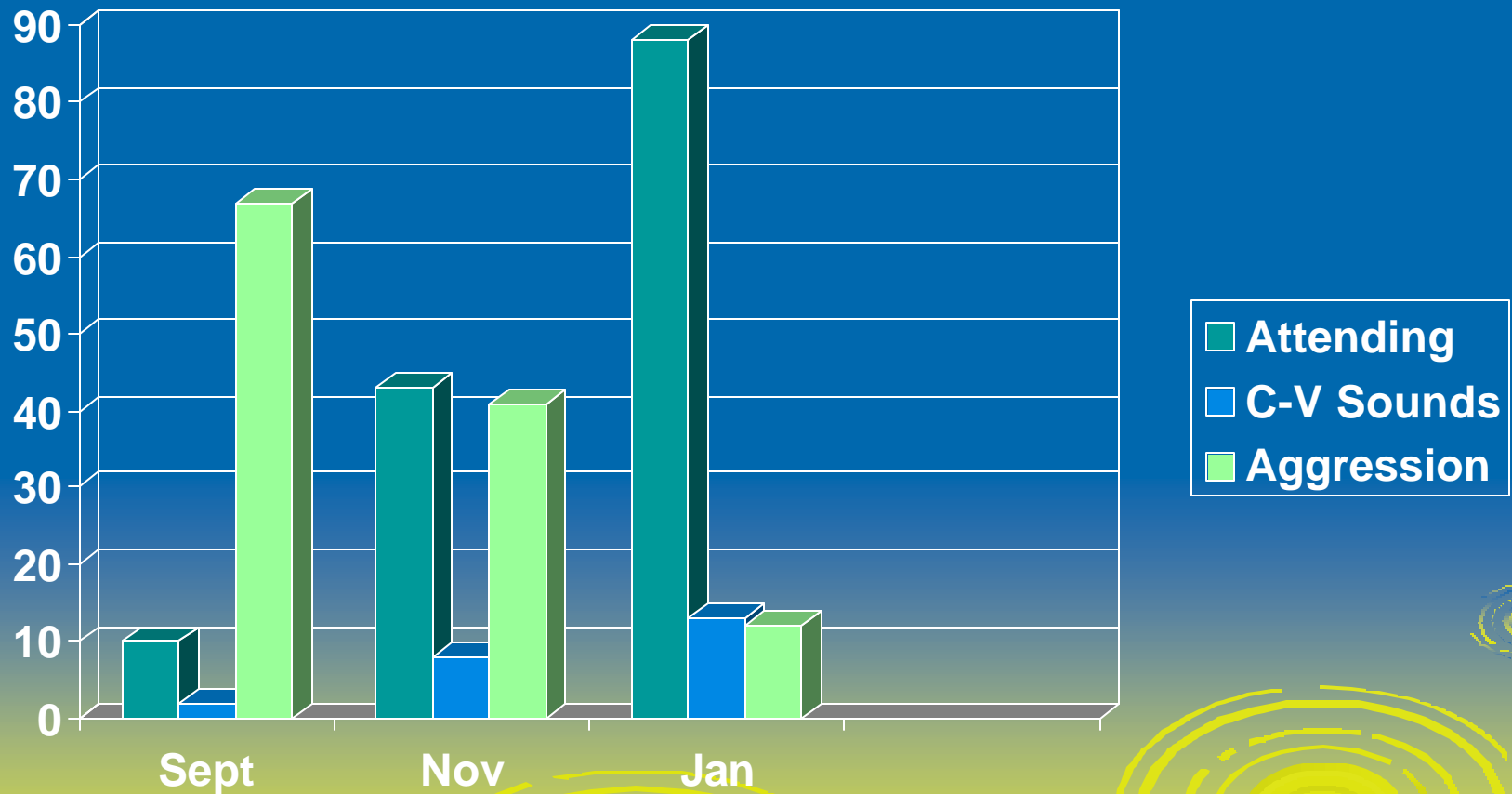
# Young Learners Preschool

- Social and emotional development are taught through the use of DIR and RDI models
- Play skills are taught as part of the curriculum- moving from parallel play to pretend and symbolic play
- Opportunities for generalization are built into the day, and homework is given to help parents facilitate the skills at home/ in the community

# Young Learners Preschool

- Data is kept on all learning opportunities and reviewed weekly
- Children are assessed every 3 months on the ABLLS, LAP and Vineland
- Assessed on ADOS at entry and again following 12 months of programming
- Teachers make home visits
- Parenting groups are provided

# Data on AW



# Outcomes

- Over 80% of students met annual IEP goals
- In 2005; 50% of graduates entered a district-based Kindergarten program
- 20% entered special ed programs for children of average to borderline intelligence
- 7 of 10 non-verbal students acquired at least 3 functional words within 9 months