

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION AUSTRALIA (VICTORIAN CHAPTER)  
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*Concurrent Paper*

**Pre-schoolers with autism:  
A parent-based education and skills training intervention. Long-term follow up  
of a randomised controlled trial \***

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\*Presented with permission from Dr Avril Brereton, Prof Bruce J Tonge, Melissa C Kiomall and Prof Neville King, Monash University, Dept. Psychological Medicine, Centre for Developmental Psychiatry & Psychology, Monash Medical Centre, Clayton.

The full paper has recently been published:

Tonge, B, Brereton, A., Kiomall, M., Mackinnon, A., King, N. and Rinehart, N. (. (2006) Effects on Parental Mental Health of an Education and Skills Training Program for Parents of Young Children With Autism: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. 45(5):561-569, May 2006.

## **SUMMARY**

Early intervention is promoted in the management of autism but little empirical evidence exists to support which, if any, of its components might be effective. This project investigated a range of child and parent outcomes of a 20 week parent-based education and skills management programme for the parents of young children (3-5 years) recently diagnosed with DSM-IV Autistic Disorder.

## **Introduction**

The aims of this project were to determine (i) whether a parent education and skills training early intervention improved the outcome for preschool children with autism relative to either a general parent education and counselling intervention or control group of children who did not receive these interventions and (ii) to assess the maintenance of therapeutic gains over time. The families were recruited from consecutive referrals to the Melbourne southern region assessment service and to four other Victorian regional autism assessment services (Geelong, Albury, Wangaratta and Bendigo).

## Method:

Subjects: The parents of children who met the criteria were randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups (a) parent education and behaviour management (PEBM) (N=35); and (b) parent education and counselling (PEC) (N=35) or a non – intervention control group (N=35). The early intervention comprised 10 small group sessions and 10 individual sessions which provide education on autism and parenting skills training.

Outcome measures included assessments of parent mental health, family functioning, child psychopathology, cognitive, adaptive behaviour and language skills measured pre and post intervention and at 1 and 2 year follow up. Retention rates in the treatment and control groups were very high. Only 2 families recruited to the PEC group did not complete the parent intervention programme for personal reasons, not through dissatisfaction with the programme. One family attended half the sessions before a change in employment meant that they could no longer attend the sessions, the other family unexpectedly moved interstate for work after only 4 sessions. No control families were lost to 1 or 2 year follow up.

## Results

At 1 year follow up there were significant improvements in the treatment groups for:

- Parental mental health (total GHQ score, somatic symptoms, anxiety & insomnia and severe depression)
- Parental stress
- Family functioning
- Child adaptive behaviour (daily living skills, socialisation and communication skills)
- Self absorbed behaviour (DBC subscale)

At 2 year follow up improvements were sustained for:

- Parental mental health (total GHQ score, anxiety & insomnia and severe depression symptoms)
- Child adaptive behaviour (daily living skills, socialisation and communication skills)
- Unresolved grief was significantly improved for parents in PEC treatment
- Stress and family functioning improvements were no longer significant in treatment groups compared to controls.

## Conclusion:

This randomised controlled trial produced evidence that either a manual based parent education and skills training or parent education and counselling intervention for parents of young children with autism are likely to improve parental mental health and adjustment in parents, particularly those with pre existing mental health problems. At least half of the parents had mental health problems therefore in situations of scarce resources perhaps they should be the ones who receive a parent education programme. However, parents who did not have mental health problems might have gained some unmeasured benefit and they all gave positive feedback about the experience. Their presence might also be an element that contributed to recovery in the parents who did have problems. The manuals for the programme have now been published.

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