

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - Top therapies for children.

How treatments other than medicine help children with ASD

There is no cure for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). But there are many treatments and therapies that can help your child from learning to speak with others to becoming independent and able to care for many of their own needs.

Dr. Patricia Evans, Co-Director for the Center for ASD and Developmental Disabilities (CADD), says that therapies are often tried first for children with ASD, before trying medicine. Children often have very different needs related to ASD. Therapies can be used in different ways to meet the needs of your child.

Applied behavioral analysis (ABA)

Applied Behavioral Analysis, also called ABA, is considered one of the best therapies for children. During this therapy, you and your child's therapist work together with your child. You learn how to give your child language and cues for how to behave through the day. This is called "immersion therapy" as it takes place all day.

"This behavioral immersion technique has been shown to consistently be the single best approach," says Dr. Evans. "It's more than just speech or behavior therapy; it turns every day play into learning activities. A therapist and parent work together with the child and provide continuous language and behavioral cues throughout the day, every day."

ABA programs can be in a small private school, part of the classroom for older children, or the therapist can come to your home. The parents commit to learning the training skills to continue to work with their child when the therapist isn't there. ABA programs teach the child, but also teach the parents how to teach and relate to their child with autism.

Speech therapy

Children with ASD may have trouble with when talking with others. There are therapists who work with your child to build these skills. These therapists are called "speech-language pathologists", or SLPs. A SLP may meet with your child 1-2 times a week, often at school, to work on speaking skills.

Occupational therapy

Another special therapist, called an "occupational therapists", or OTs, will help your child improve skills they need to do every day. This includes many things from buttoning their shirts to feeding themselves. Some children with ASD have difficulty with things like certain fabrics, loud noises, or other things that they take in through their senses. OTs can help your child with this if needed too. OTs are an important team member to help you child become more independent.

Physical therapy

Some children with ASD have problems with their gross motor (large muscle) skill. Gross motor skills are used for walking, sitting and standing up, and other things we use our larger muscles for. Poor muscle tone may be present, mainly for children who have both ASD and epilepsy. Physical therapists help children build muscle and learn how to make big movements smoothly.

A warning about alternative therapies

You may be wondering about an alternative therapy you heard or read about. Most alternative therapies are not studied, and can be not only expensive, but harmful as well.

Always talk with your child's doctor about any alternative therapy you may wonder about. They can give you some information on how well it has been researched, and what they know about how well it works.

Learn more

The Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities program offers complete patient care and translational medicine for children and teens with autism and related neurodevelopmental disorders.