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Research Snapshot No. 20

Caregiver-Implemented Intervention for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review of Coaching Components

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In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.



*Presented by Denise Luscombe,
Paediatric Physiotherapist*

What you need to know

- + Caregiver–implemented intervention, facilitated by coaching, is an increasingly common approach to early childhood intervention (ECI) for infants and toddlers with or at risk of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
- + ASD is being diagnosed earlier leading to a need to research and understand what earlier interventions support children identified at a younger age.
- + The National Research Council (USA) recommends at least 25 hours per week of “active engagement in intensive programming”.

What you need to know

- + Interventions for infants and toddlers should take place in the context of their natural environments and routines, making learning more contextual and meaningful and providing frequent learning opportunities.
- + Caregiver-implemented intervention refers to professionals using coaching to support caregivers in fostering their child's learning through natural everyday activities.
- + By supporting families in this way, it may be possible for them to achieve the recommended 25 hours of engaged time per week with their children with ASD.
- + There is little information on the use of specific coaching characteristics that impact the development of caregivers' capability.

What is this research about?

- + This paper examines coaching characteristics utilised when using caregiver-implemented intervention with young children aged 36 months or younger with or at risk of ASD.
- + The review focused on four characteristics of coaching
 - + Collaborative planning
 - + Building on caregivers' competence
 - + Guided practice
 - + Collaborative reflection and decision-making

What is this research about?

- + By systematically analysing how the four coaching characteristics are used and described, this review addresses a vital gap in understanding:
 - + What makes caregiver-implemented interventions most effective, and
 - + How coaching can help bridge the gap between research and everyday early childhood intervention practice.

What did the researchers do?

- + Systematic review of peer-reviewed studies published between January 2010 and July 2017
- + 160 articles identified initially
- + Inclusion criteria
 - + Focused on children aged 36 months or younger who had an ASD diagnosis or considered at risk of ASD
 - + Caregivers, not professionals, implemented the primary intervention
- + Only experimental designs, quasi-experimental designs or case series were considered
- + 26 studies were retained for detailed review

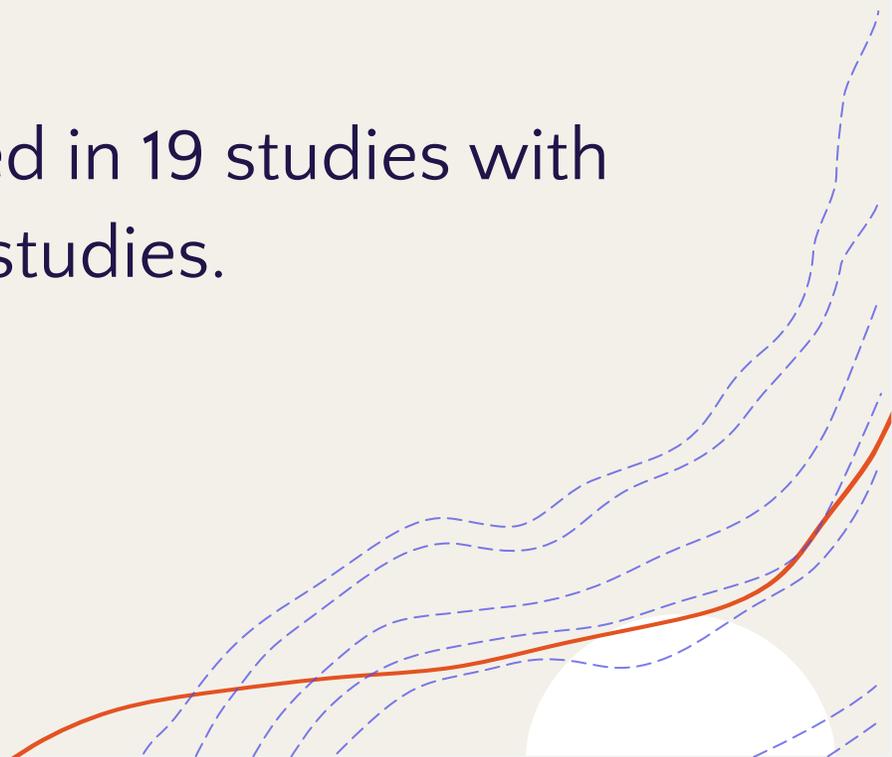
What did the researchers do?

- + Each study was coded for the presence or absence of the four coaching components.
- + Key study features were documented: participant characteristics, type of intervention model, intervention setting and whether fidelity of implementation was measured for both professionals and caregivers.
- + Interobserver agreements on coding reached 92.3% indicating strong reliability in the identification and classification of the coaching components.

What did the researchers find?

- + A clear imbalance in how coaching components are represented in the existing studies
- + All 26 studies included building on caregivers' competence
- + Nearly all (n=23) incorporated guided practice
- + Fewer than half (n=11) described collaborative reflection and decision-making
- + Fewer than a third (n=8) explicitly emphasised collaborative planning
- + Only 6 studies included all four coaching components

What did the researchers find?

- + Most interventions took place at least partially in the child's home.
 - + Fidelity of implementation was measured in most studies, although methods varied.
 - + Professional coaching fidelity was assessed in 19 studies with caregiver use of strategies assessed in 18 studies.
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What did the researchers find?

- + Overall, the findings suggested that while caregiver competence and practice are consistently targeted, the more collaborative elements of coaching (shared planning, reflection and joint decision-making) are less well integrated and less frequently reported in the caregiver-implemented intervention literature.

How can you use this research?

Early childhood intervention professionals:

- Important to move beyond a purely instructional or directive model of working to a collaborative coaching relationship.
- View caregivers as partners and co-decision-makers.
- Intentionally incorporate collaborative planning, use reflective questions to support analysis of what is working and make decisions together about next steps and priorities.

How can you use this research?

Academics and professional development providers:

- Strengthen focus on adult-learning principles such as modelling, guided practice, feedback and reflective dialogue.

Policy makers and managers:

- Support caregiver-implemented models that embed learning opportunities within daily routines rather than relying solely on clinic-based sessions.

How can you use this research?

Researchers:

- Utilise as a framework for clearly defining and documenting coaching processes in future studies, including the need to measure both professional and caregiver fidelity.

Ultimately, this research can support reflection and consideration of how to improve the quality and outcomes of ECI by working in partnership with caregivers.

Where to from here?

- + Future studies should define coaching components more precisely and describe them explicitly.
- + Clear need to investigate how different coaching components contribute to outcomes.
- + Researchers should routinely measure fidelity of both professional coaching and caregiver implementation to understand how well interventions are delivered and maintained over time.
- + Conduct more studies in children's everyday settings.

Where to from here?

- + Develop accessible, well documented intervention manuals and coaching guides.
- + Integrate robust, collaborative coaching practices into ECI services to help bridge the research-to-practice gap, ensuring that families of young children with ASD receive support that is not only evidence-based but also family-centred, practical, and sustainable.

About the researchers

- + Kimberley R. Tomeny, R.A. McWilliam and Theodore S. Tomeny are all researchers from the University of Alabama (USA).
- + This paper was supported by a graduate assistantship provided by the University of Alabama.

Citation

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Thank you for listening!