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Current Studies on TEACCH & Future Directions

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CURRENT STUDIES ON TEACCH & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Eric Schopler’s dedication to the empirical study of therapeutic interventions for individuals with autism has remained a cornerstone of the TEACCH program since its inception in 1972. In a compelling counter-explanation to the then prominent belief that parents were at fault for their child’s autism, Schopler fervently believed that this misguided viewpoint “could best be ameliorated through empirical research, education, and professional training” (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2004). This commitment to research serves as a unique basis for the creation and development of the TEACCH program worldwide.

THE INITIAL GROUNDWORK

TEACCH began in the early 1970’s in response to parents’ criticisms of the contemporary treatments for autism and in search of the best type of therapy for “psychotic children” (Schopler, Brehm, Kinsbourne, & Reichler, 1971). In pursuit of a better understanding of optimal therapy approaches, early studies revealed that children with autism engaged in more neurotypical behaviors when an adult determined the materials, time, and expectations of the child (structured) compared to when the child determined the activity (unstructured). Likewise, children engaged in more positive behaviors when the parents acted as therapists compared to therapist-led session (Schopler & Reichler, 1971). These findings together served as the groundwork for two major components of the TEACCH program: structured teaching and parents acting as co-therapists.

Although the inclusion of parents in a child’s therapy may seem indisputable by today’s standards, popular press and psychologists in the latter half of the 20th century promoted the belief that parents were to blame for the child’s autism (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2004).
Considering this environment, Schopler’s decision to involve parents in research revolutionized the relationship between therapists, parents, and children. In response, parents reported being very pleased with TEACCH, particularly for the program’s useful resources designed to help parents successfully cope with their children’s challenging behaviors (Schopler, Mesibov, & Baker, 1982). Ultimately, the inclusion of parents in their child’s treatment led to an increase in local awareness and community engagement. Parents of TEACCH would later form the Autism Society of North Carolina, which still remains the only autism-specific advocacy group in North Carolina and continues to support public policy and funding for autism related resources (Autism Society of North Carolina, n.d.).

THE MODERN ERA

Reflecting the value that Schopler placed on empirical evidence throughout his career, current studies continue to examine the effectiveness of the TEACCH program to help individuals with autism. Studies conducted around the world have found support for the TEACCH program for children with autism, particularly in areas such as perception, motor, and cognitive skills (D’Elia et al., 2014; Fornasari et al., 2015; Tsang, Shek, Lam, Tang, & Cheung, 2007). A meta-analysis of several studies examined the overall effects of TEACCH and found improvements in social and maladaptive behaviors but was unable to replicate dramatic benefits in areas like perception, motor, and cognitive skills (Virues-Ortega, Julio, & Pastor-Barriuso, 2013). The authors of this study note that their results may be attributed to a small study bias, noting that the analyses covered at most nine smaller studies. With such few studies, the authors warn that one particular study could have contributed significantly to the null results in certain domains. Problematically, the available studies also examined outcomes using different
methodologies with different aged children, contributing to the overall difficulty to empirically compare the studies. Additional studies examining the long-term impact of TEACCH across multiple domains in an individual’s life (e.g., social, communication, daily living) are necessary to better evaluate the programs worldwide. Similarly, as the program continues to expand and shift from its original design, additional research is necessary to further examine the benefits of the TEACCH model in a much more diverse context.

In conjunction with additional research, the TEACCH program continued to expand by providing assistance to adults with autism in the early 1990s. Demonstrating the therapists’ understanding of autism as a lifelong disorder, TEACCH created the Carolina Living and Learning Center (CLLC): a residential and day program for adults with autism intended to foster independence and daily life skills. For example, CLLC teaches gardening and landscaping skills while maintaining gardens and selling the products to the larger community. CLLC serves as a modern example of one of Eric Schopler’s beliefs to support individuals with autism across the lifespan.

THE FUTURE OF TEACCH

In April of 2015, the North Carolina Senate passed Bill 676, a proposed law to provide a variety of therapy options, including TEACCH, for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (“Autism Health Insurance Bill Updates,” 2015). Although TEACCH is no longer entirely funded by the state of North Carolina, this legislation would require group health insurers to cover therapy programs for ASD like TEACCH. From the perspective of an organization dedicated to supporting parents of children with autism, TEACCH supports this bill but also recommends certain revisions in order to maintain the quality of the TEACCH program.
and lessen the parents’ financial burden. The bill will now travel to the North Carolina House of Representatives and, if passed, to Governor Pat McCrory’s desk before it is signed into law.

Along with recent legislation surrounding TEACCH, current research focuses on tailoring the TEACCH model to toddler-age children. The Family Implemented TEACCH for Toddlers (FITT) program maintains all of the original TEACCH principles but specifically modifies the program to be developmentally appropriate for the younger age group (“FITT Study,” 2013). An ongoing study on FITT is gauging the effectiveness of this program by focusing on its impact on child outcomes like the toddlers’ engagement with individuals and toys in their environment and family outcomes like parental stress. A similar study is currently examining a community-based model of FITT (C-FITT) in rural North Carolina to determine if the model can be applied to families who would otherwise be unable to receive early intervention programs because of geographical distance. Together, FITT and C-FITT have expanded upon the initial center-based program established in the 1970s to serve even younger children and their families in their homes across North Carolina.

Although the source of funding may change as a result of shifts in politics in North Carolina, the dedication to using evidence-based practices as therapeutic interventions for the families of children with autism is unwavering. From the early days as a small intervention program in North Carolina based on small studies by Schopler and a group of colleagues to the widespread and internationally recognized program TEACCH is today, the role of research is deeply ingrained into the identity of the program.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Autism Society of North Carolina’s website: http://www.autismsociety-nc.org
Learn more about TEACCH’s research: http://teacch.com/research

To find your local state legislator to get involved in autism related legislation:
http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/

Carolina Living and Learning Center’s website: http://teacch.com/CLLC

References


