

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND BEST PRACTICES

The following components of effective programs and best practices are supported by the Maryland Autism Task Force Recommendations.

1. Family Involvement

Family involvement begins with referral, evaluation, and assessment, and continues through program development, implementation, evaluation, and transition. A collaborative relationship between parents and service providers is developed and maintained to maximize the benefits the child receives from intervention. Family involvement activities include:

- Providing education and information to family members regarding diagnosis and intervention options.
- Training of family members on selected intervention strategies and techniques.
- Developing support activities based on each family's unique needs that may include opportunities to network with other parents of children with autism and links with community programs and services.

2. Interdisciplinary Involvement

Because autism is a disorder characterized by deficits and abnormalities in multiple areas, a team approach to evaluation and assessment, program design, and service delivery is necessary. A comprehensive intervention program may include input from the following disciplines to ensure that all aspects of the disorder are addressed:

- Developmental pediatrics
- Special education
- Speech language pathology
- Psychiatry and/or psychology
- Occupational and/or physical therapy
- Public health
- Social work

3. Individualized Curriculum and Instruction

Program design is personalized for both content and methodology. What and how the child will learn is derived from assessment information, clinical observation, and parental input. Effectively designed programs include many of the following elements:

Content

Program content emphasizes skill development in basic domains: communication and language; social tolerance, interaction and engagement; attending; imitation; motor function; concept development; and appropriate play. Goals, objectives, and outcomes are clearly addressed in the IFSP or IEP, address deficit areas, and lead to greater

independence in functional and meaningful activities. Specific skill sequences are selected based on developmental stages and milestones and are hierarchical. Core skills are taught before more complex ones.

Highly Supportive Learning Environments

Highly supportive teaching and learning environments have predictability and established routines. Intervention may be provided in homes, community settings, or public sites. Skills that are established in highly structured settings are systematically generalized to other environments. Regardless of setting, the learning environment should include:

- A low staff-to-child ratio, particularly during the initial period of intervention as needed.
- Adaptations to assist with changes in activities or routines as needed (transitional objects, visual schedules, etc.).
- Environmental design to maximize attention to relevant information and minimize confusion and distractibility.
- Repeated opportunities to learn and practice skills.
- Opportunities to interact with typically developing peers.

Selection of Effective Instructional Strategies

Team members select research-based instructional strategies, techniques, and methodologies based on the:

- Developmental level of the child.
- The child's learning style, strengths and needs.
- The skill or task to be taught.

Data-Based Decision Making

IFSP outcomes and IEP goals and objectives must be written in clearly measurable terms. Efficient and effective data collection methods must be utilized consistently across environments and service providers, including caregivers, to ensure response to intervention, as well as generalization and maintenance of skills. Modifications should be made to intervention plans and teaching methods, materials, and strategies based on on-going data analysis.

Functional Approach to Challenging Behaviors

Positive behavioral supports are designed to promote behavioral change. The function of inappropriate behavior is determined through observation and analysis, and the child is taught alternative appropriate behaviors to serve the same function. Proactive strategies to prevent problem behaviors may include:

- Modifying antecedent or setting events.
- Implementing consequence strategies.
- Using highly-preferred materials or activities as teaching materials or reinforcers.
- Alternating preferred and non-preferred activities.
- Prompting or modeling appropriate responses with gradual prompt fading.