

The early ASD screening debate continues

Summarised by Dr. Jessica K. Edwards

The debate about screening and providing early treatment for young children with, or at-risk of, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is ongoing, but limited data are available to support either side of the argument. Now, a systematic review of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of interventions for children ≤ 6 years with (or at risk of) ASD has concluded that the available data is currently insufficient to support the argument for early intervention. The review identified 48 RCTs, the majority of which were published post 2010 (83%) and were undertaken in the USA. Most of these studies had a small sample size (<100 participants) and only six studies met the criteria for low risk of bias. Common issues included lack of blinding of outcome assessment and failure to specify a method of allocation concealment. Unfortunately, wide differences in the demographics of the sample population, the treatment model ($n=32$) and the “dose” of treatment and the outcome measures used ($n=87$) between these 48 RCTs made meta-analyses difficult. Despite the heightened interest over the past decade in evaluating early interventions in ASD, the researchers conclude that improved trial design and co-ordination of future RCTs is required before an accurate evaluation can be made.

French, L. & Kennedy, E. M. M. (2017), Research Review: Early intervention for infants and young children with, or at-risk of, autism spectrum disorder: a systematic review. J Child Psychol Psychiatr. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12828