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The Early Start Denver Model: A play-based intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorders

American Psychological Association | 2016

Abstract: In 1943, renowned American psychiatrist Leo Kanner published the first scientific paper describing “early infantile autism.” Drawing from an entire career spent seeing children with developmental and psychiatric impairments, Kanner described a group of 13 children whose symptoms seemed similar to each other’s and unique from all other diagnostic groups of children he had seen. He focused on the major differences that set this group apart: their lack of reciprocal, affective social interactions with others; their unique communication impairments; their resistance to change; and their repetitive, stereotypic, and ritualized play patterns. A variety of empirical studies conducted over the past 60 years has delineated additional cognitive and affective differences in play in autism. The effect of autism on the development of symbolic play is so profound that it has been one of the defining features of the disorder in childhood (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Difficulty with play has been found to be a more prominent symptom very early in life than the classic symptoms involving insistence on sameness and repetitive routines that Kanner emphasized (e.g., Bernabei, Camaigni, & Levi, 1998; Charman et al., 1997; Rutherford, Young, Hepburn, & Rogers, 2007; Williams, Reddy, & Costall, 2001). This chapter describes the theory and research support of the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM; Rogers & Dawson, 2010). The ESDM treatment components, implementation processes, and transportability methods are presented along with illustrative case examples. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2017 APA, all rights reserved