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Reducing maladaptive behaviors in preschool-aged children with autism spectrum disorder using the Early Start Denver Model

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Abstract: The presence of maladaptive behaviors in young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can significantly limit engagement in treatment programs, as well as compromise future educational and vocational opportunities. This study aimed to explore whether the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) treatment approach reduced maladaptive behaviors in preschool-aged children with ASD in a community-based long day care setting. The level of maladaptive behavior of 38 children with ASD was rated using an observation-based measure on three occasions during the intervention: on entry, 12 weeks post-entry, and on exit (post-intervention) over an average treatment duration of 11.8 months. Significant reductions were found in children's maladaptive behaviors over the course of the intervention, with 68% of children showing a treatment response by 12 weeks and 79% on exit. This change was accompanied by improvement in children's overall developmental level as assessed by the Mullen scales of early learning, but not by significant changes on the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales-II or Social Communication Questionnaire. Replication with a larger sample, control conditions, and additional measures of maladaptive behavior is necessary in order to determine the specific factors underlying these improvements; however, the findings of the present study suggest that the ESDM program may be effective in improving not only core developmental domains, but also decreasing maladaptive behaviors in preschool-aged children with ASD.