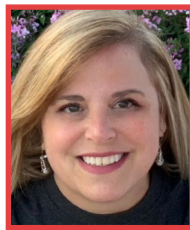




Evidence-based Practices for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Mental Health Challenges



Kim K. Floyd, PhD
West Virginia University



Lora Lee Smith Canter, PhD
East Carolina University

The integration of evidence-based practices (EBPs) for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and comorbid mental health conditions is a critical aspect of both clinical and educational interventions. With the rising prevalence of ASD diagnoses, the need for effective, research-based approaches has become increasingly important. This brief explores various EBPs that have been proven effective in addressing the unique needs of children with ASD and concurrent mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

ASD is characterized by difficulties in social communication and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Children with ASD often experience co-occurring mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and ADHD (Lord et al., 2000; Mishma & Shanmugam, 2024). Addressing these mental health concerns is crucial for improving the overall quality of life and postschool outcomes for these children. The heterogeneity of ASD means individuals can exhibit a wide range of abilities and challenges, necessitating personalized approaches to intervention.

Children with ASD are at an elevated risk for various mental health conditions (Da Paz & Wallander, 2017). Understanding the prevalence of co-occurring mental health conditions in ASD is crucial for developing targeted interventions. Recent studies indicate that anxiety disorders affect approximately 40% to 50% of individuals with ASD (Bougeard et al., 2021; van Steensel et al., 2011), while depression rates are estimated to be between 20% and 30% (Hudson et al., 2019). ADHD co-

occurs in about 30% to 50% of individuals with ASD (Leitner, 2014; Shakeshaft et al., 2023). These comorbid conditions can exacerbate the core symptoms of ASD and pose additional challenges for treatment and intervention.

Evidence-Based Practices for ASD and Mental Health

Applied Behavior Analysis

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is one of the most extensively researched and widely implemented interventions for children with ASD. The principles of ABA, such as positive reinforcement and task analysis, can be adapted to address comorbid mental health conditions (Fodstad, 2019; Lovaas, 1987). ABA interventions are grounded in the principles of behavior, which emphasize the relationship between behavior and the environment. By systematically applying these principles, ABA aims to increase desirable behaviors and decrease undesirable ones through reinforcement strategies. This framework can be adapted to support individuals with ASD who experience mental health conditions.

Anxiety and ABA

Anxiety disorders are prevalent among individuals with ASD, affecting up to 40% of this population (Nimmo-Smith et al., 2020). ABA techniques such as systematic desensitization and exposure therapy can be particularly beneficial in managing anxiety. *Systematic desensitization* involves gradually exposing

individuals to anxiety-provoking stimuli while teaching relaxation techniques, thereby reducing the anxiety response over time. For instance, a child with ASD who fears social interactions might be gradually introduced to social settings in a controlled and supportive manner, reinforcing positive social behaviors and reducing avoidance (Kaye et al., 2024).

Depression and ABA

Depression, although less common than anxiety, significantly impacts the quality of life for individuals with ASD, often emerging during adolescence (Moss et al., 2015). ABA can address depressive symptoms by promoting engagement in positive activities and increasing opportunities for social interaction. The principle of *behavioral activation* involves identifying and scheduling enjoyable activities to counteract the withdrawal and inactivity associated with depression. By reinforcing participation in these activities, we help individuals with ASD to experience improvements in mood and overall well-being (McCauley et al., 2020).

ADHD and ABA

ADHD frequently co-occurs with ASD, with some studies suggesting a comorbidity rate of up to 50% (Leitner, 2014; Shakeshaft et al., 2023). ABA techniques such as *functional behavior assessment* (FBA) and *contingency management* can effectively address ADHD symptoms. FBA involves identifying the antecedents and consequences of problematic behaviors to develop targeted interventions. For example, if a child's hyperactive behavior is found to be maintained by access to attention, interventions can be designed to teach alternative, appropriate ways to gain attention. Contingency management, which involves providing reinforcement for desired behaviors, can also help increase attention and reduce impulsivity in individuals with ADHD and ASD (Antshel et al., 2011).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been adapted for children with ASD to address anxiety and depression. CBT involves identifying and challenging negative thought patterns and developing coping strategies. CBT has been adapted for children with ASD to address specific mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Wood et al., 2015). Modified CBT techniques for children with ASD often include visual supports, social stories, and cognitive restructuring (Kendall & Hedtke, 2012). Research has shown that CBT can effectively reduce anxiety symptoms in children with ASD, leading to improvements in social functioning and overall quality of life.

Social Skills Training

Social skills training (SST) targets the social communication deficits that are central to ASD. SST programs typically involve structured group activities with direct instruction, where chil-

dren practice social interactions in a supportive environment while receiving feedback (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). These programs often include components such as role-playing, social narratives, modeling, and visual supports (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). SST can also address comorbid conditions by teaching coping skills for managing anxiety in social situations and fostering peer relationships, which can mitigate feelings of isolation and depression.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Mindfulness-based interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), have gained attention as complementary treatments for children with ASD. These interventions focus on cultivating present-moment awareness and reducing stress. Preliminary research suggests that mindfulness practices can help children with ASD manage anxiety, improve emotional regulation, and enhance overall well-being. Integrating mindfulness into existing therapeutic frameworks can offer additional tools for addressing the complex needs of this population. (Ridderinkhof et al., 2018)

Implementation and Challenges

Given the heterogeneity of ASD and the variability in comorbid mental health conditions, individualized treatment plans are essential. Assessments should be comprehensive, considering the child's developmental level, communication abilities, and specific mental health concerns. Collaborating with a multidisciplinary team, including psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and educators, can ensure a holistic approach to intervention.

Cultural and contextual factors play a significant role in the effectiveness of interventions. Practitioners should consider cultural values, family dynamics, and community resources when designing and implementing treatment plans. Culturally responsive approaches can improve engagement and outcomes by respecting and incorporating children and their families' unique backgrounds and perspectives.

Conclusion

The integration of EBPs for children with ASD and comorbid mental health conditions is a multifaceted endeavor that requires careful consideration of individual needs, practitioner expertise, and contextual factors. By employing a range of interventions, including ABA practices such as reinforcement, and FBAs as well as CBT, SST, and mindfulness-based interventions, practitioners can address this population's complex and diverse needs. Ongoing research, training, and advocacy are essential to advancing the field and improving outcomes for children with ASD and their families. Through collaborative and comprehensive efforts, we can enhance the quality of life

for children with ASD and address their mental health needs, fostering their development and well-being. ■

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