A Quick Guide to Understanding Evidence for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Understanding evidence can be very difficult, especially when experiencing the stress associated with finding out your child has a diagnosis of autism. With the accessibility of the Internet, there are many resources available for parents as they search for answers as to how to provide the best supports for their child. However, a lot of the information available on popular Web sites and media resources is not accurate or is not supported by evidence. Furthermore, it is human nature for people to look for information that confirms how they feel about a certain topic (Tickle-Degnen, 2000). This information, however, may not be the most accurate or provide the best recommendations of what to do in a given situation. The purpose of this paper is to provide parents with a quick tool for how to understand the information they find in order to evaluate if it is good information that should be used to influence their decisions.

Definitions to know:

- Meta-analysis and systematic reviews: Studies that combine the results of independent studies and synthesize summaries and conclusions.

- Randomized control trial (RCT): A study in which people are randomly assigned to either receive the intervention being studied, or to be in the “control group” (the group that receives standard intervention or no intervention at all).

These types of studies are considered to be the highest levels of evidence, and these studies provide the best information about which strategies to use or to avoid with your child (Law and MacDermid, 2008).

Look for quality

It is important to consider the quality of studies because this helps parents know how much influence the findings should have on the decisions they make for their child and their family (Dunn, 2008).

The Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) classifies evidence using the following levels:

**Level I:** Evidence based on RCTs with little chance of bias (errors and/or false results) and meta-analyses or systematic reviews of randomized control trials.

**Level II:** Evidence based on RCTs that are too small to be included in level I.

**Level III:** Evidence that is not based on randomized, controlled studies, such as case studies with very few participants.
**Level IV:** Evidence based on the opinion of respected authorities on a certain subject or that of expert committees.

**Level V:** Evidence based on the opinion of individuals’ personal experience. This includes qualitative studies and parent-reports/testimonials that are often included on Web sites. (Law & MacDermid, 2008)

**Make sure it is peer reviewed**

It is important to look in journals in which articles are peer reviewed. This means that the journal only includes articles that have been examined by other professionals in the field to ensure that the study is of good quality. In the world of autism research, some good journals to consider are:

- *Research in Developmental Disabilities*
- *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*
- *American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT)*
- *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*
- National Autism Center’s National Standards Project

**Look for credible Web sites**

The trustworthiness of Web sites is a key component of credibility. It is important to look for signs of trustworthiness when looking up information on Web sites (Fogg, et al., 2001).

Credible Web sites will:

- Include links to relevant research articles
- Give a reference for information that is included
- Include research findings that are published by people other than those who developed the intervention or therapy of interest

**References:**


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