

Outcomes of children receiving Group-Early Start Denver Model in an inclusive versus autism-specific setting: A pilot randomized controlled trial

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The question of whether children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) should be educated in inclusive or special settings is a major topic of debate. It is unclear whether evidence-supported interventions can be feasibly delivered in inclusive classrooms, and whether benefits for children with ASD are similar when they receive their intervention in inclusive or special settings.

In the current study, we examined whether it is feasible to deliver an evidence-supported early intervention program; the Group-Early Start Denver Model (G-ESDM), to children with ASD in inclusive classrooms. Additionally, we investigated whether the intervention was equally beneficial when delivered in inclusive classrooms versus special classrooms.

Across one school calendar year, 44 preschoolers with ASD were randomly assigned to receive the G-ESDM in childcare classrooms that included only children with ASD (specialized setting) or mostly children who were typically developing (inclusive setting).

Across both settings, childcare staff learned to deliver the intervention as intended, with teaching quality exceeding the national average. Children showed improvements in their communication, social interaction, imitation, and adaptive skills irrespective of intervention setting. Mothers of participants in both settings experienced a reduction in stress. Across both settings, the younger the children were, the more they improved in their communication skills.

Therefore, delivery of G-ESDM in an inclusive setting appeared to be feasible, with comparable benefits when the program was implemented in inclusive and specialized classrooms.