

Little Learners – Publication Summary

Many families ask for background research on Autism Partnership’s Little Learners program. The summary below describes the most recent publication (published in September, 2024).

Article Title: “A Programmatic Description of an Early, Intensive Behavioral Intervention Program in Australia”

What did this article look at?

The authors looked at each child’s “response to intervention” whilst participating in Little Learners. That is, how much progress each child made while they were receiving intensive intervention, compared to their progress prior to starting these more intensive supports. They examined this by looking at their scores on standardised assessments at the start of intervention and after one year. The authors also investigated whether it is possible to predict - before children start - which children will make the most progress.

Who were the participants in this article?

This paper included 154 children who had participated in Little Learners across an 11-year timespan. The children attended for an average of around one year. The typical age (at the time of enrolment) was 41 months, but this varied from anywhere between 16 months to 61 months.

What type of intervention did the children receive?

Children received 27 hours of direct intervention, which was predominately 1:1 in format, with some small group teaching (1:2 ratio). Families participated in the child’s intervention services, and support could be provided in the centre, home, community or educational setting depending on each individual child’s needs.

What progress did the children make?

When looking at the group as a whole, the children made significant progress in the following areas:

- Cognitive skills – that is, a child’s skills across different areas of early childhood development (both verbal and nonverbal skills)
- Adaptive behaviour – the skills a child shows in everyday life. This included:
 - Improved communication skills
 - Improved socialisation skills
 - Improved self-care skills
 - Improved adaptive behaviour skills overall

The skills the children did not make significant progress in were motor skills. However, these skills were quite a bit higher than the other areas of development, even at the start of intervention.

In addition to looking at the group as a whole, the authors also explored the results for children individually so that they could see the different outcomes for every single child. They examined this by looking at each child’s change in “learn rate” over time. Learn rate is a way to assess how much learning a child achieves or displays in a certain amount of time. For example, if a child at four years of age has the developmental skills expected of a child aged two years, we can say that their learn rate is 0.5 (put more simply, they have half the skills expected for their age).

Key findings in relation to the learn rate of children who participated in Little Learners include:

- 84% of children showed an acceleration in their rate of learning whilst participating in Little Learners
- Almost half of the children (49%) more than doubled their rate of learning to what it was prior to Little Learners
- 52% of children showed a learn rate of 1.0 or higher during intervention, meaning they were learning 12 months of skills in 12 months of time (which is similar to the rate of learning of their same-aged peers)

These findings highlight that intensive behavioural intervention can be very effective for a wide range of young autistic children. This change in learn rate means children can learn substantially more skills in their years of early intervention, ensuring they get the right start in life.

When the authors looked at the children’s abilities prior to enrolment and their rate of learning during Little Learners, they found that a child’s skill level at the start *does not* predict whether a child will show acceleration in their rate of learning. We might interpret this as showing that the skills a child has (or does not have) prior to starting Little Learners don’t determine the child’s rate of learning once they start.

The authors also found that children who were younger at intake (e.g., around 2–3 years old when they first started) made significant progress, but children who started a little later (e.g., around 4–5 years of age) also made significant progress. Although we know that starting intervention as early as possible is important, this finding tells us it's not too late to start if a child is already 4 or 5 years old.

What does this research mean?

This paper provides evidence that early and intensive intervention can meaningfully accelerate the rate of learning of young autistic children, thereby laying the foundations for future learning. Within only a year, early and intensive behavioural intervention fundamentally changed the learning trajectories of most children. While this is only one paper, and more research is needed, the results were profound and significant. We contend that continued intervention (e.g., more than one year) would lead to continued positive changes in the children's learning trajectories. More generally, this paper shows the importance of having high expectations for the children we serve.

Article reference:

McKinnon, K., Cihon, J. H., & McEachin, J. (2024). A programmatic description of an early, intensive behavioral intervention program in Australia. *Behavioral Interventions*, e2060. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bin.2060>