

Putting Care Options in Caregiver Hands: Social ABCs with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder



What is this study about?

An important part of a child's growth is using words and sounds to communicate with caregivers (refers to parents and others caring for the child). For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), talking with caregivers or others can be hard. Challenges can be noticed as early as 12 months.

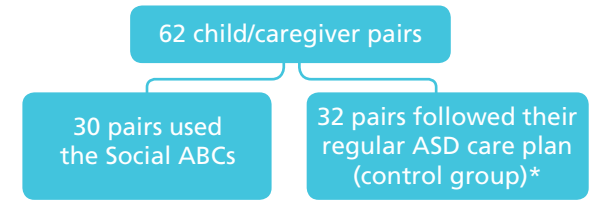
In this study, caregivers, along with their child, were part of a caregiver coaching program called the 'Social ABCs'. The Social ABCs program was created to help teach caregivers to develop verbal communication and strengthen relationships between them and their children. Families were able to take part if their child had ASD or social-communication delays that put them at risk for an ASD diagnosis. The child had to be between 16-30 months of age.

The study team looked at how the communication and social skills of children showing signs of ASD improved after being part of the Social ABCs program with their caregivers.

More about the Social ABCs

Caregivers are taught how to increase their child's communication (using words or sounds) and sharing positive moments during play and natural opportunities. It is a 12 week program where caregivers get coaching from a trained professional in their home and/or community environment. Coaching starts off at 3 times per week and slowly decreases to once every 2 weeks by the end of 12 week program.

Children in the Social ABCs group were compared to those who were not part of the Social ABCs program. The study was a cross-site randomized control trial that involved:



*When the study was finished, the 32 pairs who followed their regular ASD care plan (the control group) were able to try the Social ABCs program.

What is a 'cross-site randomized control design'?

A **randomized control design** means that after families agree to be part of a study, they are put into a treatment group or a control group based on an order that was decided before they signed up for the study. Randomized control trials are an important step in bringing new research findings to the public, but they are not the last step in the process. This study refers to a program that is being considered for public use and the results provide evidence of the benefits of such programs.

A **control group** is a group of participants who do not get the study intervention. Control groups are important because they help researchers understand how regular care works compared to a new program.

Cross-site means that families were asked to take part in the study from two different places, for example two different children's rehabilitation centres.

The team wanted to see if being part of the Social ABCs program could increase the child's ability to:

- (1) Respond verbally when their caregivers spoke to them;
- (2) ask for something or talk to caregivers without being prompted;
- (3) share a positive moment with their caregiver by looking at them and smiling;
- (4) pay attention to the caregiver

The team also wanted to see if the caregivers could use the Social ABCs program with their child in the way that they were being taught.



What did the study team find?

Children in the Social ABCs Group:



Responded more to caregiver words

Made more sounds or words without their caregiver prompting them



Caregivers in the Social ABCs Group:



Smiled more as they played with their child

Were able to learn and use the program with their child in the way it was meant to be used



- Caregivers who interacted with their child without any support from the Social ABCs team (control group) also naturally used elements of the program in their everyday caregiving. This suggests that the Social ABCs program can easily fit into the lives of families of children with ASD without a lot of added stress or pressure.



What this means for caregivers

This research tells us that finding a program that you can use with your child early on in life and in the home can help your child's growth and allow learning to happen more naturally between you and your child. If learning happens more naturally, it may be easier for you and your child to keep using the elements of the program on a day-to-day basis.

Consider connecting with your healthcare and social care teams, or your local advocacy group. They can help you find programs or funding opportunities to support you and your child. Knowing what programs are available and if they meet the needs of your child and family is important! You might want to look for programs that:

- are low cost
- can be used at any time by the caregiver; and
- can be changed to meet the needs of the child and their family

To find out how you and your child can access the Social ABCs:

- visit [Holland Bloorview's Autism Program](#) page
- contact the intervention team (416-425-6220 x 3410)

From a caregiver who read this study:

“It seems like with the coaching, even after the coaching stopped, the caregivers were able to continue on consistently...”

Tips for speaking to your healthcare provider:

Are you the caregiver of a child with ASD? Think about asking:

- what programs are being offered to help you interact with your child
- if there are programs in your area that you can be part of and can use to help your child early on in their development
- what local groups or resources can help you and your child to connect



For more information

Find the [abstract here](#) or visit your local library:

Brian, J.A., Smith, I.M., Zwaigenbaum, L., & Bryson, S.E. (2017). Cross-site randomized control trial of the Social ABCs caregiver-mediated intervention for toddlers with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research*, 10(10), 1700-1711.

- View [Dr. Brian's researcher profile](#)
- Check out resources from Holland Bloorview's [Autism Research Centre](#)

