

**Critical Review:**  
**The Effectiveness of TEACCH on Communication and Behaviour in Children with Autism**

Butler, C.P.  
M.Cl.Sc. (SLP) Candidate  
School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, U.W.O.

This critical review examines the effects of the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) program on communication and behaviour in children with autism. The current research is limited and few studies provide strong research-based evidence to support the implementation of the program. Professionals who provide intervention to children in this population need stronger evidence that supports this program, in order to present accurate information to parents.

***Introduction***

Autism is a developmental disability that affects communication and language from early on in life. It involves the inability to express communicative functions and engage in typical social behaviour (Paul, 2001). Some common characteristics include lack of social or emotional reciprocity, the inability to initiate and sustain conversation if speech is present, or in some cases the delay or absence of spoken language with no attempt to communicate in other ways. Some children with autism also engage in repetitive motor behaviours such as rocking or hand-flapping (Paul, 2001). It should also be noted that autism is a lifelong disability.

Although several treatment interventions exist, strong evidence-based research is still limited. The Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (Division TEACCH) is a program that was established in 1966 at the University of North Carolina by Eric Schopler and Robert J. Reichler (Peeremboom, 2001). At the time of its development, it was believed that autism was caused by parental failure to provide adequate emotional support. Therefore, Division TEACCH employed a novel philosophy in that parents not only were not to blame for causing autism in their child but that they play a crucial role in treatment (Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998). It was hypothesized that children with autism responded better to a structured learning situation rather than an unstructured one. Parents therefore collaborate with professionals to provide that structured environment (Peeremboom, 2001). The TEACCH approach focuses on the individual with autism as well as developing a program around his/her skills, interests, and needs (Division TEACCH). It is built on three important aspects, 1) early diagnosis and assessment 2) parental

collaboration, and 3) structured teaching (Peeremboom, 2003).

Although research exists on each of these aspects alone, there are still very few quality outcome studies on its overall effectiveness (Peeremboom, 2003; Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998). Therefore the question still remains, *is TEACCH an effective treatment for children with autism?* The rationale then, is apparent. Intervention teams around the globe, which include speech-language pathologists, need strong evidence to support the treatment they are involved in and to validate the costs of its implementation.

***Objectives***

The primary objective of this paper is to critically evaluate the existing literature regarding the effectiveness of TEACCH on the communication and behaviour of children with autism. The research studies will be analyzed on the basis of their sample size and the use of control groups, because few studies are strong in these areas. It is important for design methods to compare treatment groups. Without the use of control group, it is difficult to know if change can be attributed to the intervention or to developmental maturation (Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998). To date, there are very few studies that have used this type of design. Many of these have been done without the use of control groups making it difficult to isolate and measure the effects of the TEACCH program (Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998).

The secondary objective of this paper is to propose evidence-based clinical recommendations for the use of TEACCH in this unique population.

## *Methods*

### **Search Strategy**

Computerized databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, and Medline, were searched using the following search strategy:

((TEACCH) and (autism)) OR ((TEACCH) and (efficacy) OR (treatment) OR (program)).

The search was limited to articles written in English.

### **Selection Criteria**

Studies selected for inclusion in this critical review paper were required to have investigated the effectiveness of TEACCH on communication and behaviour in children (persons under the age of 15 years) with autism. Studies were also required to have employed the use of control groups in their research design. No limits were set on the demographics of research participants or outcome measures.

### **Data Collection**



*Conclusions*

In conclusion, the above research suggests that more information is needed, in comparing