

ABA4ALL

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Big NHS (NIHR) research study into the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of pre-school ABA - finally published today. It concludes there's some* evidence early ABA (EIBI) works better than the UK's 'treatment as usual' in crucial areas for our autistic children - such as communication, social skills and IQ. But, they say, "it's too pricey".

No surprises there. The NHS' own research arm was never going to recommend spending new money. But there is gold in this mammoth 342-page report too. Not least the fact that we now have a current, UK-specific document echoing the conclusions of previous research reports like Cochrane about the gains made via EIBI - to use at tribunals etc.

The study says at page v: "Results favoured the [ABA] interventions when assessing adaptive behaviour ...after 2 years compared to treatment as usual/eclectic interventions... In analyses of cognitive ability (IQ), results favoured [ABA] by approx 10 points after 1 year and 14 points after 2 years".

These are sizeable IQ gains from early ABA. And later (pages 41 on) they break down exactly what they mean by 'adaptive behaviour'. The biggest adaptive behaviour gains are in 3 'Vineland' areas: communication (which includes talking, reading & writing); socialisation (stuff like turn-taking, play skills, conversational skills etc) and daily living skills - which include washing, maths, toileting, telling the time - a long list.

So in my book that's ABA improving *pretty much everything* a child needs to learn before school starts. There is a lot of talk in this hefty report about how there's not enough evidence such gains last (or 'persist') into adulthood (funny that no-one ever questions that when my non-autistic kid was taught eg to dress herself or communicate?) and clearly many anti-ABA voices and anecdotal tropes are aired portentously throughout the report. But thankfully the researchers have stayed this side of fair - acknowledging the gains made for autistic children, however much various UK autism establishment vested interests might have wanted them not to (see some jaw-dropping comments at the end from our 'national' autism charity, the PBS-using NAS).

However, if I were a parent wanting the NHS to fund some early ABA, or a nursery providing EIBI, I would be having a close look at Table 26 on page 80 (see photo). It shows there are levels at which ABA *would* meet NHS cost thresholds. In fact it says that in their 'optimistic scenario' (where a child retains into adulthood the skills they learn in the early years) "there is a sizable and plausible range of values under which early intensive ABA-based therapy would be considered cost-effective at NICE thresholds." This is big news and might be useful to parents in funding fights. At around the £27k mark ABA starts to look viable on NHS QALY criteria and in fact at £18k EIBI is 'dominant' over treatment as usual - meaning it is both better *and* better value for money. These costs are surely achievable?

*'some evidence' is still evidence. They prefer in this report to use the technical research word 'limited' - as they say there are not enough randomised controlled trials (RCT). But nor are there RCT for anything much in the autism sphere, and certainly not for the current treatment as usual mix (SALT, OT etc) which the NHS merrily forks out for - an anomaly the report fails to comment on. The authors also make clear that much of this report is based on non U.K. data, which anyway ends in 2011, and they do acknowledge the lack of a full picture of current UK ABA practice. And, as the UK-SBA says in its excellent comments (Appendix 20), it's odd that this study happily accepts all the *clinical* data from other countries, but then dismisses the piles of evidence of long term cost-effectiveness from other countries (eg the Netherlands, Canada, US) as 'not relevant to the UK'. Having cake and eating it?