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Effectiveness of intensive autism programmes

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In their Seminar on autism (Nov 7, p 1627),¹ Susan Levy and colleagues claim that intensive programmes based on applied behaviour analysis (ABA) “were highly effective for up to half of children enrolled in about ten randomised clinical trials done in the past 20 years”.

The review that Levy and colleagues cite for this claim, by Rogers and Vismara,² describes five randomised controlled trials, three of which do not involve trials of intensive ABA-based programmes. In one of the two other trials, by Sallows and Graupner,³ the intended comparison between randomised groups was not done. As Rogers and Vismara accurately report, Sallows and Graupner “merged data from both groups, changing the design into a noncontrolled pre–post design”.

This leaves a study reported by Smith and colleagues,⁴ which in fact is the only published randomised controlled trial to study intensive ABA-based programmes for autistic children. As Rogers and Vismara note, the results of this one very small study (intervention group $n=15$) do not support the claim that intensive ABA-based programmes are “highly effective”, especially not for children with the specific diagnosis of autism.

Thus, the claims made by Levy and colleagues, with respect to intensive ABA-based programmes for autistic children, have no basis—either in the review they cite or in any other published study.

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