Field Report: Promoting Evidence-Based Interventions: The Association for Science in Autism Treatment

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Abstract This field report profiles the Association for Science in Autism Treatment, which is an organization that aims to help parents and providers to find treatments that have empirical support and steer clear of treatments that lack such support

Keywords Autism · Applied behavior analysis · Evidence-based practice · Treatment outcomes

An extern at the Association for Science in Autism Treatment (ASAT) (Fig. 1), Sarah Jenkins assembled a list of more than 400 purported treatments for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In addition to a panoply of interventions based on applied behavior analysis (ABA), the list includes a variety of psychotropic medications, treatments that involve complementary and alternative medicine (e.g., vitamin therapies, herbal treatments, special diets, and detoxification regimens), sensorimotor therapies (e.g., sensory integration therapy and auditory integration therapy), developmental social-pragmatic therapies that focus on back-and-forth social communication (e.g., Joint Attention Symbolic Play and Emotion Regulation), social skills groups, and many others. Most of these interventions have attracted little or no research, but a few—particularly psychotropic medications, developmental social-pragmatic therapies, and social skills groups—are currently being evaluated in larger, well-controlled studies than are ABA interventions (Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee, 2014). Considering this vast number of potential treatment options, one must wonder how families, especially families responding to a new ASD diagnosis, make timely treatment decisions that promote best outcome and how community providers keep up.

Founded in 1998, ASAT aims to help parents and providers to find treatments that have empirical support and steer clear of treatments that lack such support. Its mission is to “promote safe, effective, science-based treatments for people with autism by disseminating accurate, timely, and scientifically sound information; advocating for the use of scientific methods to guide treatment; and combating unsubstantiated, inaccurate and false information about autism and its treatment” (Association for Science in Autism Treatment 2014). ASAT is a not-for-profit corporation of parents and professionals from a range of fields, including ABA, psychology, medicine, law, and business.

ASAT has three main initiatives: First, it puts out a free quarterly newsletter, *Science in Autism Treatment* (<http://www.asatonline.org/newsletters/index>), that contains synopses of the recent treatment studies, interviews with leading researchers and clinicians, a clinical corner with advice for families and professionals, a “focus on science” column with commentary on how to evaluate claims about treatments, and updates on ASAT’s activities. Second, it has a media watch committee that submits letters to the editor in response to stories about treatments for ASD in the popular media. These responses include congratulatory remarks for reporters who accurately reflect the state of the science in their articles, as well as clarification when they present false or misleading information (e.g., reports of purported ASD treatments that lack critical analyses and/or have highly charged emotional content). Third, ASAT maintains a website that presents descriptions of common treatments for ASD and brief summaries of research on these treatments, providing the public with quick objective resources to use when encountering new ASD interventions. The website also includes other resources such as book reviews and archives of ASAT publications. ASAT’s Facebook page and Twitter account provide an additional access to these resources.

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ASAT Real Science, Real Hope

ASSOCIATION FOR SCIENCE IN AUTISM TREATMENT

Fig. 1 The logo of the Association for Science in Autism Treatment

Executive Director, David Celiberti, Ph.D., BCBA-D, explains ASAT's *raison d'être* (Fig. 2):

“What concerns us are the assumptions - made by consumers and providers alike - that promoted ‘therapies’ have legitimate therapeutic value, when, in fact, there is often little-to-no scientific evidence to support them. Some might rightfully say that many of these touted methods are ‘quackery’ without such evidence. The focus on such unproven methods or ‘therapies’ might result in financial hardship and caregiver exhaus-

Fig. 2 David Celiberti, Ph.D., BCBA-D, Executive Director of the Association for Science in Autism Treatment

tion, further exacerbating the stress levels of participating families. What is most alarming is that these ‘therapies’ may be detrimental because they may separate individuals with autism from interventions that have a demonstrated efficacy, thus delaying the time of introduction of effective therapy.”

ASAT is not an ABA organization; however, it is an organization that advocates for the application of science in ASD intervention. As such, it serves as one more way in which families and professionals can investigate the “state of the science” of ABA-based interventions (e.g., early intensive behavioral intervention) alongside the dozens of other interventions, including the dozens of expensive, time-consuming, and scientifically unsubstantiated interventions hawked by marketers around the world. As stated by Celiberti, “It remains our collective responsibility to ensure that treatment decisions are grounded in science, responsible, individualized, and informed by data to assess progress.”

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