Book Review


Autism – From Research to Individualized Practice provides an analysis of the body of research, as well as current clinical applications, in the field of autism. The text focuses on integrating knowledge from the research arena with individualized treatment approaches. Gabriels and Hill designed a text that provides the scientist, as well as the clinician, with a comprehensive investigation of the theories, research, and applications within the field of autism.

According to the authors, the gap between the research and clinical application has yet to be bridged. Additionally, “...no one treatment model or approach has yet been researched in comparison with another ... (p. 20),” therefore the text reviews current research findings as they relate to various treatment approaches. In order to promote the integration of research and treatment, Gabriels and Hill divide the text into three sections: Diagnosis and Assessment, Child-centered Interventions, and Family and Community Interventions.

Although there has been significant progress in the understanding of the etiology of autism, as well as improvements in intervention strategies, there continues to be a discrepancy between research and application. To this point, the authors begin the text by examining the diagnostic process; they discuss the positive and negative aspects in regards to the conceptualization and assessment of autism. The variety of diagnostic procedures has long created debate in the field of neuropsychology. While many clinicians choose to use flexible batteries that provide a wealth of qualitative information, researchers prefer standardized or fixed batteries that are quantifiable. Edith Kaplan (1988) argued that “the process approach to neuropsychological assessment differs from the fixed and flexible battery approaches in that the standardized and experimental tests are not scored in a binary fashion ... and are not administered in the standardized manner. It differs from the clinical investigative approach in that qualitative aspects of behavior are quantified and subjected to statistical analyses rather than just described, and that testing of clinical limits is operationally defined, repeatable, and quantifiable, as opposed to particularized for a given patient.” The interplay between research and clinical practice is critical in developing valid and reliable treatment approaches. Interaction between the fields is enhanced when quantifiable procedures exist, that maintain the integrity of comprehensive clinical evaluations.

The initial process of diagnosing and establishing a treatment protocol for a particular child, must be based on the use of valid assessment tools and detailed parental interviews. In Chapter 2, Shulman describes several instruments that have been utilized by researchers, as well as clinicians. Furthermore, the author stresses the importance of ongoing assessment in order to adapt intervention strategies; she states, “treatment plans need constant refinement to match the needs of the child at a particular time and in a particular setting (p. 41).”

Hill and Kodituwakku (Chapter 3) describe the neuropsychological profiles present in children with the diagnosis of autism. They suggest that the variety of profiles may, in fact, provide reason for multiple conceptual frameworks. With that in mind, the authors critically review the literature concerning various theories of brain-behavior relationships in autism. Although much of the debates in research have propagated the development of new assessment procedures and tools, Hill and Kodituwakku note the gap still present between theory and practice in the field of autism. The authors argue that theory is required to guide research and, then, application of sound clinical interventions.

Given the diverse medical conditions associated with autism, as well as the significant impact these disorders have on the success of treatment interventions, Goldson (Chapter 4) discusses the conditions that occur more frequently in children with autism than in the general population. Such medical issues include seizures, gastrointestinal disorders, hearing loss, mental retardation, metabolic disorders, and ADHD. Although many children with autism may have co-morbid medical diagnoses, one must be
cautious in distinguishing autism from other developmental disabilities. Batshaw (1997) notes that children with a group of neurological diseases initially may be misdiagnosed with autism, due to the presentation of autistic features. Given the sometimes complicated differential diagnosis in the earlier years, Goldson encourages the medical professional to collaborate with all members of a treatment team, in order to better serve the child with autism. He notes that these children require professionals knowledgeable of the various medical conditions that may afflict a child with autism, but also cognizant of the fact that these children should receive “the same kind of medical surveillance as do other children (p. 82).” Furthermore, it is critical that clinicians understand the complex and variable etiologies for autism and continue to evaluate the application of these theories on a case by case basis.

Following review of diagnostic and assessment procedures, Part II of the text explores the client-centered interventions, including cognitive and behavioral therapy, speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, and educational practices. Gabriels (Chapter 5) notes the plethora of psychological theories supporting a multitude of treatment approaches. Given the abundance of theory and data, this chapter focuses on the two main theoretical frameworks (Behavioral Learning Theory and Developmental Theory) behind three of the most well-known treatment strategies. Gabriels states, “It is important for providers to understand these two philosophies and be informed about the research in these areas so that treatment techniques can be knowledgeably applied as needed to individualize treatment, rather than rigidly adhering to one approach over another (p. 94).”

Schuler and Fletcher (Chapter 6) provide the reader with an extensive review of the communicative behaviors present in children with autism. The clarity in which the authors offer a distinction between the terms speech, communication, and language only augments their description of the complexity of communicative delays in children with autism. Children with autism present with varying levels of meaningful communication and comprehension. Likewise, the authors argue that effective intervention strategies are dependent on consistent review of the child’s development and refinement of treatment approaches.

Occupational therapy typically addresses sensory and motor functioning as they relate to one’s ability to perform tasks, use tools, play, and complete daily living skills. While Stackhouse, Graham, and Laschober (Chapter 7) note that there are no primary sensory or motor impairment criteria for the diagnosis of autism, there has been mixed findings concerning both sensory and motor processing. The authors provide a comprehensive review of sensory integration theory, including a descriptive analysis of sensory modulation and sensory discrimination. They clearly indicate that the manifestation of sensory and motor processing deficits in children with autism is variable. Furthermore, treatment of such deficits does not typically produce the functional improvements apparent in children without autism. To further bridge the gap between theory, research, and practice, the authors then present case examples describing the impairments, as well as the most efficient intervention strategies.

Bunsen (Chapter 8) explores current educational approaches to teaching children with autism. The author argues that an effective educational plan must engulf multiple methodologies and continually account for the changing needs of the learner. The gap between research and practice can only be closed with careful documentation of the effectiveness of treatment approaches. To this end, the author presents several methods for collecting data in the realms of communicative supports, academic supports, social supports, and environmental supports. Finally, the chapter concludes with a practical checklist of “Quality Indicators of Best Practice."

The significance of the role of the family and community in the treatment of children with autism has long been noted in clinical practice, however research specifically addressing their impact has been limited. In Part III of the text, Kerstein and Gabriels (Chapter 9) examine the sibling relationship when one of the siblings has autism. The authors note that current research focuses on four avenues including sibling stress, peer teaching interventions, sibling teaching interventions, and sibling support interventions. Given the available research, the authors developed a psychoeducational support group for siblings of children with autism. The group, which is outlined in the chapter, focuses on sibling support and interactive interventions that allow the siblings to become lifelong friends and teachers. The chapter ends with a list of available resources for siblings.

Marcus and Bianco describe a method for programming social experiences for adolescents with autism (Chapter 10). Given its documented success