

# How well do Imagine If's Intervention Experiences align with the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendations for learners with Autism?

## The American Academy of Pediatrics has set out guidelines of best practices for managing children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

In light of the growing body of knowledge regarding the increased incidence of autism, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released two documents *aimed at clarifying diagnostic practices and informing doctors about the various therapies and educational strategies for children with autism spectrum disorders*.

The second report, titled **"Management of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders,"** lays out a framework against which potential therapies should be evaluated. The report has a large section on "Educational Interventions," which includes information on the types of interventions currently available. This includes sections on "Developmental Models," including "Relationship Focused Intervention (RFI)," "Speech and Language Therapy," and "Social Skills Instructions," all of which encompass what Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience offers.



**Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** aims to maximise each child's potential to function as independently as possible in a mainstream setting (although what this will look like in future is currently unclear). This focus is consistent with what the AAP recommends in terms of certain goals of treatment that are highlighted in the report and are elaborated upon in the next page. As you will see, **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** includes all the important principles and components of effective early childhood intervention for children with ASD, as prescribed by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

## What Are The Goals of Therapy?

The AAP states that the primary goals of treatment are:

1. To minimise the core features and associated deficits of ASD.
2. To maximise functional independence and quality of life.
3. To alleviate family distress (Myers, 2007, p.1163).

The report identified the following means to help accomplish these goals:

1. Facilitating the child's development and learning.
2. Promoting social skills.
3. Reducing maladaptive behaviour.
4. Educating and supporting families (Myers, 2007).



All of the above goals and delivery processes are intrinsic components of the unique Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience.

In any autism treatment, **early intervention is crucial** since it results in significantly better outcomes – a fact that has been consistently identified in the research literature. Early intervention is typically thought of as pre-school age. However, the **critical early intervention window is actually between the ages of one and three** when children are developing all the core skills across the developmental domains, especially the all-important cognition and communication skills.



## What Makes An Effective Intervention Programme?

The AAP has identified certain principles and components that are common to effective early intervention programmes for children with ASD:

1. Intensive intervention (at least 25 hours per week in developmentally appropriate activities with identified objectives).
2. Providing the child with a structured environment by creating elements such as predictable routines and clear physical boundaries.
3. Inclusion of a family component including parent training.
4. Focus on the development of social skills, including joint attention, imitation, reciprocal interaction, and initiation.
5. Facilitation of the generalisation of newly-learned skills to new contexts.
6. Low student-to-teacher/therapist ratio to allow sufficient amounts of 1:1 time, and small group instruction to meet specific individualised goals.
7. Promotion of opportunities for interaction with typically developing peers to the extent that these opportunities are helpful in addressing specified goals.
8. Use of assessment-based curricula with ongoing measurement and documentation of progress towards goals, resulting in adjustments in programming when indicated.

**Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** successfully incorporates every single one of these critical elements.



## Developmental/ Social-Pragmatic (Relationship-Focused) Intervention

Relationship-focused intervention models, like **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience**, use responsive interaction strategies to encourage the child to learn specific behaviours geared to their individualised developmental needs. This approach is derived from a large amount of research that has shown a positive relationship between the degree to which caregivers, therapists, and educators use responsive interaction strategies with children and the child's level of cognitive functioning (Mahoney & Perales, 2003). Studies to date have shown improvements in the children's cognition, communication, and socio-emotional functioning beyond what was expected from maturation alone (Myers, 2007). Mahoney and Perales (2003) expand as follows:

*"The most important finding from this study is that the children who participated in the interventions made statistically, and we believe clinically, significant improvements in social-emotional functioning. These improvements were indicated by **decreases in their problem behaviours, including detachment, under-activity, and self-regulation, and increases in their social competence, as indicated by items measuring empathy and cooperation, as well as by observations of social interactive behaviours (p.85).**"*



Recently, a randomised control trial demonstrated that joint attention and symbolic play skills can be taught in naturalistic contexts, and that these skills generalise to different settings and people (Myers, 2007). Furthermore, as the AAP report itself states in reference to the social-pragmatic approach, "the quantity and quality of the research are increasing" (Myers, 2007, p. 1166).



## So Just How Closely Does **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** Adhere To The AAP's Guidelines?

In a nutshell, **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** includes all the important principles and components of effective early childhood intervention for children with ASD, as prescribed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In fact, the guidelines could have been created based on **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** itself!



### At **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience**, we:

- Provide intensive intervention, at least 25 hours per week (including clinic, playground, and classroom settings, as well as home follow-up).
- Focus on developmentally appropriate activities with individualised objectives for each child.
- Provide children with a structured environment by creating elements such as predictable and natural routines that they can learn to anticipate and respond to.
- Include individualised family training components whereby caregivers (parents, grandparents, helpers) are trained to facilitate learning and interactions in the home environment.
- Focus heavily on the development of social skills, including joint attention, imitation, reciprocal interaction, and initiation, in small group learning environments that stimulate school settings.
- Facilitate generalisation of newly-learned skills to new contexts through changing settings (i.e. classroom, playground, public areas, and changing communication partners such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, educational therapists, parents, grandparents, helpers, and members of the community).
- Boast a low student-to-teacher/therapist ratio to allow sufficient amounts of 1:1 time and small group instruction to meet the specific individualised goals set out for each child within the programme.
- Promote opportunities for interaction with typically developing peers and, where appropriate, therapists work in partnership with local and international schools throughout Singapore to provide these invaluable experiences.
- **Utilise assessment-based curricula that address:**
  - a. Functional, spontaneous communication
  - b. Social skills, including joint attention, imitation, reciprocal interaction, initiation, and self-management
  - c. Functional adaptive skills that prepare the child for increased responsibility and independence
  - d. Reduction of disruptive or maladaptive behaviour by using empirically supported strategies, including functional assessment
  - e. Cognitive skills, such as symbolic play and perspective-taking, and traditional readiness skills and academic skills as developmentally indicated.

The use of assessment-based curricula with ongoing measurement and documentation of progress towards goals means that the **Imagine If Team** is able to make responsive and effective adjustments to programming as and when indicated.

As you can see, **Imagine If Bespoke Education Experience** includes all the important principles and components of effective early childhood intervention for children with ASD, as outlined by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

For more information on this state-of-the-art programme, and how we can assist your patients with ASD, please do not hesitate to contact us:

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#### References:

Mahoney, G., Perales, F. (2003). Using Relationship-Focused Intervention to Enhance the Social-Emotional Functioning of Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 77-89.

Myers, Scott M. (2007). Management of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, *Pediatrics*, 120 (5), 1162-1182.

Scott M. Myers, MD, Chris Plauché Johnson, MD, MEd the Council on Children With Disabilities *Pediatrics Management of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders Vol. 120 No. 5 November 2007, pp. 1162-1182.*