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## Review

# Parent-implemented naturalistic language interventions for young children with disabilities: A systematic review of single-subject experimental research studies

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to critically review and examine the empirical literature focused on parent-implemented naturalistic intervention approaches designed to support language development of young children with disabilities who were 60 months or younger. A systematic review of the literature yielded 15 parent-implemented naturalistic language intervention studies that employed a single-subject experimental research design to evaluate functional relationships between (a) parent training and parents' implementation of the naturalistic intervention approaches, and (b) parents' implementation of naturalistic intervention approaches and child language learning outcomes. The studies were examined using an investigator-developed coding protocol. The results indicated that parents could learn naturalistic language interventions and were able to implement them with their young children. The review showed that when parents' implemented these interventions positive changes were identified in the children's language skills. Critical features of parent-implemented language interventions are discussed. Limitations of the present review as well as the current literature are identified. Future directions to advance research focusing on parent-implemented naturalistic language intervention approaches are highlighted.

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## 1. Introduction

The acquisition of language skills is very critical for young children as language development is one of the foundations upon which other developmental skills are built. Children with typical development acquire language skills naturally by interacting with their social environment (Harlaar, Hayiou-Thomas, Dale, & Plomin, 2008). Children with disabilities, however, may not acquire these skills at the same rate as children without disabilities during the early years of their lives (Harlaar et al., 2008; Snowling, Bishop, & Stothard, 2000).

According to the report of the (United States (U.S.) Preventive Services Task Force, 2006), delays and deficits in language acquisition are the most prevalent early childhood disabilities that affect about 1 in 12 children (i.e., approximately 5% to 8% of all preschool children and 70% of preschool children with disabilities). Delays and deficits in the acquisition of language skills can cause serious problems in young children's social, emotional, and educational development (Warren & Rogers-Warren, 1983). To prevent negative influences of language deficits on their development, it is important to provide young children with disabilities with language-focused interventions as early as possible (Moeller, 2000; Warren, 1991; Yoshinaga-Itano, Sedey, Coulter, & Mehl, 1998).

Several intervention approaches have been developed to support the language development of young children with disabilities. Early language interventions were developed based on the behavioral model. Behavioral approaches are developed based on the theory of Skinner (1957) who believed all behaviors are learned and language needs to be directly shaped and reinforced. Early applications of behavioral interventions were highly structured and adult-directed. In early behavioral programs educating young children with disabilities, instruction was often delivered in contrived environments using a discrete trial training method. In this model, each trial begins with an instruction or question from the adult (antecedent), followed by a response from the child, and a consequence (reinforcer) delivered by the adult (Lovaas, Koegel, Simmons, & Long, 1973). In a teaching session, the child and adult sit at a table with environmental distractions minimized and the adult presents consecutive trials until the child performs the behavior to a pre-determined mastery level. In this model, the adult initiates and determines the content of the language teaching regardless of the child's interests (Delprato, 2001). The consequence provided after the child's correct response is usually unrelated to the target language response. Abundant empirical evidence exists in the literature supporting the effectiveness of discrete trail training in helping individuals with disabilities develop language skills (e.g., Charlop-Christy & Carpenter, 2000; Lovaas & Taubman, 1981; Lovaas et al., 1973).

Although discrete trail training is effective in terms of rapid language response acquisition, several limitations of this method are noted in the literature. Due to its highly-structured nature, children who acquire the language skills during the intervention context fail to generalize these skills to new contexts and maintain them over time (Hart & Risley, 1968). In addition, because language teaching sessions are conducted outside of natural, everyday communication situations, children often fail to use the language skills they learned during intervention sessions when communicating with others during naturally occurring activities and routines, outside of the intervention contexts (Hart & Risley, 1968). In the late 1960s, after observing the lack of generalization of language skills taught through highly-structured training sessions, using the same behavioral principles, Hart and Risley (1968, 1974, 1975) developed a naturalistic teaching procedure called incidental teaching and demonstrated its effectiveness with children from socio-economically disadvantaged families.

Following the studies by Hart and Risley, researchers continued to investigate the effectiveness of incidental teaching. Incidental teaching requires children to initiate communication and therefore, several modifications were made to use this

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