

Autism Research Review

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

A quarterly publication of the Autism Research Institute

Reviewing biomedical and educational research in the field of autism and related disorders

Computer program may aid autistic children's language

Fast ForWord is a training program designed to improve language-disabled children's skills. The popular computer program, developed by researchers at UC San Francisco and Rutgers University, is designed primarily for children with dyslexia and language-based learning disorders. However, new research suggests that it may also benefit children with autism and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD).

Paula Tallal, one of the program's developers, recently tested Fast ForWord on 10 autistic and 18 PDD subjects. The children used the program for 100 minutes each day, for a period of 20 to 60 days.

Most of the subjects "made major gains in acoustic and phonological reception and in language comprehension," Tallal and colleagues report, adding that "interestingly, large improvements in both receptive and expressive [test scores] were recorded."

"These studies," Tallal et al. say, "show that major gains in language abilities can be very rapidly achieved in at least most of these severely impaired children by computer-guided training targeting fundamental acoustic and speech reception abilities."

Despite their encouraging results, the designers of Fast ForWord stress that of all groups of language-impaired children they have tested, children with autism made the smallest gains. And pediatrician Lawrence Diller notes that "there are some claims about its applicability across the board that I think remain quite speculative... it remains to be seen whether or not [Fast ForWord] will be as successful in other people's hands."

Fast ForWord costs \$850, plus fees charged by each clinician. Fast ForWord can be obtained from clinicians certified to administer the program. (Note: See p. 7, for more on Fast ForWord.)

"Rapid training-driven improvement in language ability in autistic and other PDD children," P. Tallal, G. Saunders, S. Miller, W. M. Jenkins, A. Protopapas and M. M. Merzenich, *Soc. Neuro. Abstracts*, Vol. 23, Part 1, 1997, p. 490. Address: Paula Tallal, Center for Molecular and Behav. Neuroscience, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ 07102.

DAN Conference gets rave reviews

The Third Annual Defeat Autism Now! (DAN) Conference was held in San Diego, September 19-21. Well over 200 physicians and parents (many physicians were parents of autistic children) attended, some from

Europe and Asia. "Best and most useful conference I ever attended!" was a frequent comment.

The DAN! Project brings world leaders in advanced biomedical methods of treating autism to meet with and share their expertise with front-line physicians who treat autistic children.

Videotapes and audiotapes of the conference are available. See insert in this issue of the ARRI, or write or fax ARI for a list of available DAN! materials (fax 619-563-6840).

Plan now to attend the next DAN! Conference, which will be held in New Jersey October 2-4, 1998. Details later.

Great news: a tasty vitamin B6 formula!

A new, good-tasting vitamin B6 and magnesium formula, Super Nu Thera 500, is now available from the Kirkman Company of Wilsonville, OR. SNT-500 is a strawberry flavored liquid concentrate that is well-accepted by the vast majority of autistic children. The company will continue to sell the Super Nu Thera formula as a flavored powder and as unflavored tablets. All three products contain, in addition to the B6 and magnesium, 20 other nutrients designed to enhance the effectiveness of the B6.

Editor's note: In 1967, when we started our research on vitamin therapy for autism, I wrote to 30 vitamin manufacturers, asking if they would make flavored tablets for us of the four vitamins we wanted to evaluate on autistic children (vitamin C, and vitamins B3, B5, and B6). Only two firms bothered to reply. One simply said, "Not interested." The other, Kirkman Labs, said, "Certainly, tell us what you want and we'll do it." Vitamin B6 is bitter, but vitamin B3 (niacinamide) is worse. Stan Bachman, the original owner of Kirkman, made countless flavored variations of the B6 and B3 for us so we could proceed with our study. His successor, Ken Humphrey, the current owner of Kirkman, has continued Stan Bachman's policy of doing whatever is humanly possible to help the children. Ken and Stan are among the kindest and most helpful people I've ever had the good fortune to meet. They have made an enormous contribution to the welfare of our children. *Note that the Autism Research Institute does not have any financial connection to Kirkman or to any commercial product or form of therapy.* To contact Kirkman: 1-888-KIRKMAN; fax (503)682-0838.

Calif. Board of Education okays SIBIS

On November 14, the California State Board of Education voted to allow a San Diego student to wear the SIBIS (Self-Injurious Behavior Inhibiting System) during school hours.

SIBIS consists of a headband worn with an arm or leg band. When a severe head blow occurs, the SIBIS unit beeps, and delivers a mild electric shock over a small skin area. Although the device is safe, requires a prescription, and often controls even severe head injury in cases where drugs and behavioral approaches have failed, its use in schools is often prohibited because it is an aversive procedure.

The parent who successfully petitioned the California State Board of Education commented after the vote, "We have a victory here... for parents who have suffered the horrible nightmare of living with children who hit themselves uncontrollably."