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Is One Style of Early Behavioral Treatment for Autism 'Scientifically Proven?'

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Abstract. *Within the field of autism spectrum disorder, the attribute 'scientifically proven' is most commonly seen in reference to the results of early behavioral treatment, and in particular, one style of early behavioral treatment. In this brief article, such claims are evaluated. Concerns raised by other researchers about the methodology of the original Lovaas (1987) study are briefly summarized. A particular concern that has been raised repeatedly is the lack of random assignment of participants to treatment versus control group. A more recent study (Smith, Groen, & Wynn, 2000), which included the necessary random assignment of participants to treatment versus control group and assessed multiple outcome measures, is reviewed. The results of the Smith et al. (2000) study with random assignment appear to be less dramatic than the results from the original Lovaas (1987) study.*

The attribute 'scientifically proven' is common bait for consumers. Over 20 books advertised on Amazon.com contain in their title the phrase, 'scientifically proven.' These books include titles promising readers that they can reverse heart disease (Ornish, 1996); gain physical fitness without exercise (Stamford, 1990); become an effective coach (Smith & Small, 1996); cure age-related memory decline (Crook & Adderly, 1998); and create world peace (Roth, 1994). Over 300,000 websites promise scientifically proven solutions to a myriad of challenges, ranging from the scientifically proven way to stop cancer (www.stopping-cancer-naturally.org/) to the scientifically proven "best way to lace your shoes" (www.techdirt.com/articles/20021204/1436200.shtml). There is even a U.S. political party (www.natural-law.org) whose members claim that their platform is based solely on "scientifically proven solutions to the nation's problems."

Of those 300,000 websites promising scientifically proven solutions, over 600 discuss scientifically proven 'solutions' for autism. Frequent among these websites about autism are the following claims: "FACT: There is a scientifically proven effective treatment principle for treating children with autism. This treatment is called Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Using highly trained certified staff administering 30-40 hours per week of intensive one-to-one treatment, the studies show that 47% of the children reach normal functioning. They are indistinguishable from their peers." (www.oregonparentsunited.org/articles/effective_autism_treatment)