

At the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development, including the Duke Autism Clinic, we offer a range of behavioral health services. Below, we provide information about our philosophy and the types of behavioral health services we offer.

Philosophy

We offer services that help each person live a life with purpose and meaning. We seek to understand the goals of each person and their family and develop a plan together to help them reach their goals. In developing a plan, we consider the needs of the whole person, including behavioral and physical health needs. We provide referrals and care coordination with other Duke and community providers who treat conditions such as sleep, gastrointestinal, eating, mental health, and other medical conditions that many people on the autism spectrum face.

We respect and celebrate diversity in all forms, including neurodiversity and diversity in culture, race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. We use strategies that are supported by science, meaning that they have been shown to be helpful in improving the quality of life for persons on the autism spectrum and their families. We shape each treatment plan to the needs, values, and goals of each patient and their family. We monitor the effectiveness of the treatment plan and, with feedback from the patient and patient's family, adjust the plan if progress is not being made. Among the treatment approaches we use are the following:

Early intervention for infants through early school age

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI)

NDBI uses strategies that include play, favorite activities, and everyday interactions to encourage a child's development in speech and language, thinking and reasoning, daily living, as well as play and friendship skills. These strategies include families as a key part of the treatment plan, can be used at home or in other community settings, create opportunities for the child to have choices, which improves cooperation in activities, and use natural feedback given by the child to encourage the development of skills. Many research studies have shown that NDBIs are helpful for young children on the autism spectrum.

While there are a wide range of NDBI approaches, we use the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), developed by Dr. Geraldine Dawson, director of the Duke Center for Autism, and her colleague, Dr. Sally Rogers. Currently, we offer family-coaching for using ESDM strategies at home. More information about ESDM family-coaching can be found on our [website](#) and in [this book](#) written by Drs. Sally Rogers, Geraldine Dawson, and Laurie Vismara.

NDBI approaches are different from traditional Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). ABA is a common therapy that uses knowledge about how people learn to help modify behavior. Although some strategies from ABA are included in NDBIs, such as using cues to encourage specific skills (e.g., “prompting”) and consequences that encourage certain behaviors (e.g., “reinforcement”), NDBIs primarily use strategies that are similar to everyday interactions, follow the lead of the child, incorporate the child’s favorite activities, and view the family’s and child’s goals, preferences, and skills as central to the therapy.

Interventions for school age children, adolescents, and young adults

Individual or group therapy may be used to support the needs and goals of older children, adolescents and young adults, such as managing their emotions and learning coping skills, communication strategies, problem-solving skills, self-esteem, and social and daily living skills. Other goals of individual therapy may include supporting organizational and study skills, for example. For those experiencing significant anxiety or depression, a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach may be most effective. If medication or other medical treatment is a part of the care plan, our behavioral health provider will work closely with a psychiatrist or other physician. CBT is described below.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been shown to be helpful for addressing a wide range of behavioral health needs, such as anxiety and depression. Numerous research studies with autistic adults and children on the autism spectrum have shown that that CBT leads to significant improvement in an individual’s daily living skills and quality of life. CBT helps an individual understand how their thinking patterns influence behavior, learn problem-solving skills to cope with challenging situations, and develop positive self-esteem and increase self-confidence. More information about CBT can be found [here](#).

The Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development delivers state-of-the-art interdisciplinary clinical care, conducts cutting-edge research, trains the next generation of scientists, and advocates for public policies to help ensure people on the autism spectrum reach their full potential. The Duke Center for Autism is a part of the Duke University School of Medicine and the Duke Institute for Brain Sciences.