



The Early Start Denver Model comes to Australia *...and it's here to stay!*

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) hosted Professor Sally Rogers and her team (Dr Laurie Vismara and Dr Cynthia Zierhut) in Australia in order to introduce The Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), in late February 2009. The ESDM is an autism specific behavioral and relationship-based intervention program for infants and toddlers with Autism Spectrum Disorder, aged between 12-60 months.

Young children learn as much and as fast as they do because their experiences in the world are “scaffolded” by the important people in their lives. Autism impedes this process. Thus children with autism:

- miss learning opportunities through watching
- have difficulty learning from communications
- have difficulty imitating others and miss opportunities to learn by copying.
- are not as flexible in their play skills and this limits their learning.
- may not find social experiences as inherently rewarding which can result in reduced time in interactions of all sorts.

Since interactions are a primary learning opportunity for toddlers, fewer interactions mean fewer learning opportunities. Young children with autism have a number of developmental delays in many areas by the time they reach the toddler period, and these are the targets of treatment in the ESDM. Therapists / parents are taught multiple teaching tactics that are associated with growth in the infant's social communication behaviours. Improvements are also noted with respect to the severity of behavioural indicators related to autism between 18 and 24 months of age. This is an intervention model that equips therapists and parents with the necessary intervention skills to engage, communicate with, and teach their very young children with or at risk for autism.

Given the applicability of the ESDM to very young children, and the recent work undertaken at OTARC to promote the early identification of children with an ASD in Victoria, we felt it incumbent on us to bring out the ESDM to Australia.

[Click here to read more about the Early Start Denver Model at UC Davis, USA](#)

Introductory Forum



Professor Rogers presenting ESDM at the forum

Associate Professor Dissanayake & Professor Rogers

In the introductory forum held at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre on February 24th 2009, Professor Rogers described the theoretical and empirical framework, curriculum and teaching principles of the ESDM. In a one-day forum, She addressed how to: (a) administer and complete a developmental assessment of children's skill levels; (b) develop individualised, developmentally-appropriate teaching objectives; (c) implement the ESDM teaching practices and fidelity system to evaluate technique use; and (d) maintain data management and address poor or limited child progress, when needed.

One hundred and seventy forum participants were taught how to: (a) discuss the origins, scientific framework and teaching practices of the Early Start Denver Model; (b) utilise a systematic curriculum aimed at developing an individualised and comprehensive intervention program; and (c) implement a defined set of teaching practices to be integrated during daily life routines for promoting child learning across multiple areas of development.

The forum was hugely successful, with participants consistently reporting on Prof Roger's expertise and the evidence base that supports the model. Of particular interest were the instructional videos shown by Prof Rogers of implementation of the ESDM with young children, which clearly serves to promote their early development.



Networking between sessions

Intensive Training Workshop



Dr Vismara training her team

In addition to the introductory forum, Prof. Rogers, Dr Vismara and Dr Zierhut each trained an autism intervention team from Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia respectively. The three teams, each consisting of four professional experts in autism, were trained on how to implement ESDM within their own service. In due course, the three trained teams will be able to train others on this evidence-based model. Details of each team are given below. The training sessions took place at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre at La Trobe University's Bundoora campus on 26 and 27 February 2009.

The two-day workshop provided each team with an in-depth training on how to generate and embed a developmentally appropriate teaching curriculum during naturalistic routines for infants and toddlers with ASD. Participants worked with the UC Davis team leaders and a young child with autism to receive hands-on experience in: (a) implementing an assessment tool for evaluation of children's skill levels across developmental domains; (b) building comprehensive intervention and data management programs; (c) integrating intervention strategies to promote child growth; and (d) evaluating therapist technique use of intervention strategies.



Professor Rogers with the team from Irabina

Professor Sally Rogers and her team



Professor Rogers, Dr Vismara and Dr Zierhut field questions during the forum

Sally J. Rogers is a developmental psychologist and a Professor of Psychiatry at the M.I.N.D Institute, University of California Davis where she specialises in conducting research into autism and other developmental disorders, especially involving very young children and their families. Professor Rogers is the principal investigator of one of the new NIMH/NICHD Autism Centers of Excellence network projects studying treatment of infants and toddlers with autism. Her research grants have been funded to study early social, cognitive, and emotional development, development of motor skills, communication, imitation, and language in young children with autism and other severe disabilities and treatment efficacy in autism. She heads a training program for postdoctoral researchers and lectures internationally on developmental and treatment related topics in autism. She has written extensively in her field, authoring well over 100 articles and books on autism and related topics. Professor Rogers serves on the editorial board of many publications, including the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, and *Infants and Young Children*. She is the associate editor of *Autism Research* and the current president of the International Society for Autism Research.

In addition to research, she is also a clinician, providing evaluation, treatment, and consultation to children and adults with autism and their families. In the last ten years she has worked closely with public school districts to incorporate best practices in autism into inclusive educational programs for children with autism and is currently working on projects that examine the infant autism phenotype with Dr Sally Ozonoff and Dr. Marian Sigman, and developing infant/toddler treatments in collaboration with Dr. Geraldine Dawson at the University of Washington.

[View Professor Sally Rogers' profile at UC Davis, USA](#)

Dr Cynthia Zierhut is a Licensed Clinical and Developmental Psychologist specialising in the early identification and treatment of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and their families. Dr Zierhut received her doctoral degree at the University of California of Los Angeles where her research focused on styles of play between parents and their very young children with Autism that promoted language and social development in the children over time. Dr Zierhut currently holds the position of Treatment Coordinator on the National Institute of Mental Health funded Autism Center of Excellence project lead by Dr Sally Rogers. This study is a randomized control trial and multisite project examining the efficacy of the Early Start Denver Model as a treatment approach with children ages 12-24 months of age with Autism.

[View Dr Zierhut's profile at UC Davis, USA](#)

Dr Laurie Vismara is an educational psychologist and certified behavior analyst who specializes in conducting treatment research with young children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families. Dr Vismara received her degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara where she studied with Drs Robert and Lynn Koegel at the Koegel Autism Center. She received extensive clinical experience in implementing Pivotal Response Training in both school and home-based intervention programs for children with ASD. Dr Vismara is an assistant professional researcher at the UC Davis M.I.N.D. Institute working with Professor Rogers on:

1) understanding the early signs of Autism Spectrum Disorders in high-risk infants; 2) developing a parent education model for immediate provision of intervention services for diagnosed or at-risk infants and toddlers; and 3) examining delivery methods and teaching strategies for dissemination of evidence-based intervention models to community early intervention providers.

[View Dr Vismara's profile at UC Davis, USA](#)

Training Teams

The following teams were selected to undergo the Early Start Denver Method Intensive Team training with Professor Sally Rogers and her team – at La Trobe University, Bundoora.

Irabina Children's Autism Services

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Team Members:

Diane Bailey-Tribe - Manager, OT, Child Psychotherapist
Rick Foley – Speech Pathologist
Sonia Street – Psychologist
Gwenda Moore – Occupational Therapist

Autism Spectrum Australia – Early Intervention

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Team members:

Corinne Cunningham – Speech/Language Pathologist
Maryann Pease – Psychologist
Emma Dresens – EI Teacher
Sarah MacInnes – Occupational Therapist

Autism Association of WA – EIP

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Team Members:

Tasha Alach – Manager
Fiona Milner – Senior Speech Pathologist
Zoe Taylor – Autism Teacher & Senior Support Manager
Julie Hall – Teacher & Program Support Manager

Outcomes

We are delighted to report that the ESDM is about to be implemented in each of the three newly announced federal government Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELCC at La Trobe University, Liverpool New South Wales, and Prospect, South Australia). This means that the ESDM is here to stay! Importantly, the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, together with Prof Rogers and her team, will oversee the implementation of this program at the Margot Prior Wing, in the La Trobe University Community Children's Centre, in an effort to promote the best possible outcomes for children who enrol in the new ASELCC program.

Click here to read more on the new national [Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres \(ASELCC\)](#)