Next to the Heart: Where Autism Intervention Should Be

A review of

The SCERTS™ Model: A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders, Vol. 1: Assessment, Vol. 2: Program Planning and Intervention
by Barry M. Prizant, Amy M. Wetherby, Emily Rubin, Amy C. Laurent, and Patrick J. Rydell

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Reviewed by
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My student Jeta (pronounced "Yeta") Deva has just completed her BA at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo. Last year Jeta became the national expert on autism intervention almost overnight when a family employed her to work with their four-year-old daughter who has moderate autism. The parents flew in some German specialists who gave Jeta intensive training in an applied behavior analysis (ABA) method for working with the girl. No one else in Kosovo has had such systematic and intensive training in any method; therefore, many people ask Jeta for advice on working with children with autism. The last time I was in Prishtina I showed Jeta the two manuals that had arrived for review. I carefully explained to her that these manuals take a different attitude toward assessment of children with autism and intervention with them. Upon hearing the explanation, she took the books, hugged them close, and said, "I have been waiting for something like

this. The method I was taught is not in my heart." Of course, I promised Jeta the books when the review is finished.

The SCERTS model approach for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is also in my heart, and that sums it up. As the authors write, SCERTS is an acronym for *social communication, emotional regulation*, and *transactional support*. Proponents of the model believe that these are the three central problems one faces in dealing with the autistic spectrum, and therefore the model concentrates on assessment and intervention in these dimensions.

Anyone who has worked with a child with autism or is a parent or sibling of such a child knows that it is easy to preach an intervention but excruciating to practice. I must admit to wondering through the first half of the first volume how well all these wonderful principles can be implemented. I also must admit that I only read the manual and did not run out to see how it is really done. However, beginning with the end of the first volume, the wealth of particulars and fine points the authors mention caused me to believe that these people have actually worked with many children with autism all up and down the spectrum and know what they are doing.

I am getting ahead of myself; let us begin at the beginning. The books under discussion are actually a two-volume manual of the SCERTS model, billed as *A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders*. The first volume addresses assessment issues, whereas the second volume deals with intervention. It seems plausible, in evaluating a manual, to expect that there will be enough theory so that the reader can comprehend what he or she is doing and a great deal of instructions on exactly how the work should be done. Although some psychotherapy manuals seem to expect an advanced student to pick up the manual and after some studying to actually do psychotherapy with it, I do not believe that this is a fair demand. Rather, it seems that the manuals were designed to accompany a training course, for reference along with proper mentoring. Under this assumption, I believe that this manual fulfills reasonable expectations. I tried it a little with Jeta, who has used another method altogether to work

about 25 hours a week with her young client, and she seemed to instinctively grasp the method and how it is different (apparently in a positive way) from the one she presently uses.

Of the five coauthors of the manual, four have their major professional background in speech-language pathology and one in occupational therapy. Although it probably is not too surprising that there are no psychologists who are leaders of the model, it was rather surprising to me that none are teachers (two of the five authors have degrees in education along with their OTR/L or CCC-SLP qualification). Although at the moment they all live in widely diverging areas of the United States, it seems that they have collaborated in person at the Rocky Mountain Autism Center in Littleton, Colorado, and perhaps still spend some significant part of their time there. According to their website, the center offers mostly orientation and training for parents and families of children with ASD, as well as weekly therapy sessions.

The SCERTS model draws extensively on sources and experience in child development—especially language development—and therefore justifiably calls itself a developmental model. Emphasis is placed on three levels of language development: the social partner stage, the language partner stage, and the conversational partner stage. All three stages emphasize meaningful communication with others as the major reason for language acquisition. In the social partner stage, communication with purpose or intent is discovered, as well as use of conventional gestures and vocalizations. In the language partner stage, real words appear as part of the meaningful communication process, and one can notice the precursor of grammar. Grammar becomes apparent as the child begins to use it extensively in the conversational partner stage. In this stage the child integrates grammar and vocabulary to create a conversational discourse with others. The manual elaborates in exquisite detail what can go wrong in each stage for the child with ASD.

From a theoretical point of view, the most important part of the manual is a chapter that compares the SCERTS model with other major models for working with children with ASD. I now

address this chapter in some detail. The chapter begins with a rather longwinded description of how the model complies with the National Research Council's (2001) six instructional priorities. More important, what follows is a highly detailed description of where the model stands on 18 dimensions of educational programming for children with ASD. The dimensions are clustered into four major categories: teaching practices, learning contexts, child characteristics, and programmatic goals. What is impressive to me in this approach is that the dimensions are for the most part practice driven rather than based on factor analysis. The implication here is that the writers of the manual are highly reflective practitioners. This is not to imply that the model is not based on research but that research and practice are strongly interactive in this model. Although the analysis is too detailed to present here in full, I highlight the following.

For the most part, the authors compare the SCERTS model with traditional ABA models (traditional behavior management) and contemporary ABA models (positive behavior support). These models are not specified in this portion of the chapter, although examples are given in other chapters and in a previous portion of this one. It would have been useful to end the chapter with a table comparing the various methods vis-à-vis the dimensions or at least the major categories.

At any rate, the SCERTS model is presented as emphasizing developmental as opposed to present interactions, flexible teaching as opposed to prescriptive teaching, and facilitative as opposed to directive. The SCERTS model focuses on an interpersonal and interactive model in dealing with problem behaviors, seeing them as evidence of emotional dysregulation rather than dealing with each behavior as it appears (presentation of the approach to dealing with problem behaviors is more complex here, and I have done some injustice in condensing and synthesizing it). The model emphasizes the qualitative as opposed to quantitative side of data gathering. In the measurement of change, there is a short discussion of the perils of measuring change by using IQ scores. As someone who has occasionally surrendered his better judgment and been tempted

to attempt an IQ test with a child having any autism but the lightest, this small return to sanity was quite a relief. I can see no way that a standard IQ test can be useful in measuring anything at all for a child with significant autistic features.

In learning contexts, the SCERTS model emphasizes "naturalness," defined "in reference to whether an activity or event designed for learning already occurs or can be scheduled to occur as a regular routine in a child's life experiences across a number of different partners, contexts, or environments" (Vol. I, p. 125). This definition is reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach to developmental psychology, which later generated ecological approaches, especially influencing community psychology (Trickett & Mitchell, 1993). It is particularly gratifying to see this approach taken out of the experimental context and into the daily life of the real world, where it was meant to be in the first place. The manual also adds a much-needed dimension to the ecological approach, opening a niche for children with disabilities.

The SCERTS model makes a bold venture into exposing children with ASD to socially complex situations, as perhaps a corollary of the naturalness of the learning context. This is juxtaposed to behavioral methods in which complex behaviors are broken down into manageable skills. It seems from the manual that although the authors recognize the utility of simple skills, an attempt is made to shoot for the complex as much as possible.

The SCERTS assessment process begins in Chapter 7 of the eight chapters of the first volume. The assessment process (appropriately acronymed SAP, for SCERTS assessment process) is a highly complex, detailed, multidisciplinary project. It requires both intensive study of the more theoretical and orienting chapters beforehand and, as mentioned before, extensive mentoring. Although a person with a professional background who has studied the manual, or even a parent who has lived for a while with a child with ASD, can follow the instructions, in many instances a great deal of judgment must be used, and therefore the work must be mentored strictly in the beginning. Most of

the assessment is done by observation (SAP-O), whereas some of it is done by report from parents or teachers (SAP-R). The process is designed to be as nonintrusive as possible; therefore, mercifully, standardized testing is not used.

One particularly attractive aspect of the SAP is the effort made to involve the family in the process, including finding creative ways to involve siblings. SAP instructions explicitly promote specific ways in which to involve parents in the assessment process. Nevertheless, while parents are invited to be an active part of the process, this can still be limited to receiving and commenting on the report. Parents' questions are taken into consideration when observing the child. My own preference, however, is to be more forceful in involving the family, particularly the parents, in all stages of the assessment process.

Such a procedure was developed by Greenspan and Weider (1998) using a method similar to, but of more limited scope than, the SCERTS model: the DIR (developmental, individual-difference, relationship-based) model. A group associated with Greenspan developed a process called the IDA (infant-toddler development assessment) based on a constructivist approach to assessment (Meisels, 1996). The IDA process calls itself a performance approach, whereas the SCERTS model uses a curriculum-based approach. The basic difference between the two is that the curriculum-based approach is static (i.e., an evaluation is finished and discrete), whereas the performance-based approach is dynamic (i.e., ever-changing and continually building on itself). Nevertheless, there are many similarities in these two approaches, as pointed out in this manual.

One of the advantages of curriculum-based assessment is that a good assessment is a systematic preparation for good intervention. Volume II presents the process introduced by the SCERTS manual, and the organization facilitates an elegant transition, as the authors write, "from assessment to implementation." After a relatively short guide to SCERTS education practices, the manual proceeds to emphasize the transition from assessment to intervention at the three

communication levels mentioned at the beginning of this review: the social partner, language partner, and conversational partner stages. The programming is done through the transactional support component of the model. This is because the transaction component is based on the relationship between the child and a partner. This relationship can be a direct transaction, or it can be through support for such a direct transaction through support services or through the classroom.

There are three basic criteria for setting goals: functionality, addressing family priorities, and developmental appropriateness. The first and third of these are no surprise. Functionality is valued in almost all of the educational models for children with ASD, and developmental appropriateness is one of the mainstays of this particular model. Although addressing family priorities was mentioned in Volume I, this criterion gives the family the central position it deserves.

Another exciting approach developed in Volume II is called the "MA & PA" approach; that is, the goals are implemented by selecting and designing activities that are meaningful (MA = meaningful activity) and purposeful (PA = purposeful activity). The terms *meaning* and *purpose* have often been considered almost oxymoronic when dealing with children who have ASD. Designing MA and PA for implementing goals requires a great deal of creativity and experience. Moreover, the authors present a continuum on which to design the activities, from planned activity routines to naturally occurring events.

As promised, the intervention is flexible and not prescriptive; that is, the manual discusses in detail the characteristics of partners working with the child. One expects the partner to be responsive, to foster initiation, to respect the child's independence, to set the stage for engagement, to provide developmental support, to adjust language input to the child's developmental level, and to model appropriate behaviors. While the manual details specific activities, I am sure that most partners are in need of both support and intensive mentoring to fulfill expectations.

⚑ True to the goal of involving families, the manual again emphasizes ways to be family centered in intervention, and here the authors are a bit more successful than in the assessment component. The reminder of ways to involve the family here is more intended as a reminder for professionals that they should include the family as much as possible. There is also an excellent summary of goals and specific objectives for the program on page 71 of Volume 2. The manual goes on to delineate strategies for planning programs and intervention for children at each of the three developmental stages and does a good job of integrating all of the goals in a clear fashion, so that with some help through good mentoring, both parents and professionals can benefit greatly from these volumes.

⚑ It should also be mentioned that all the paperwork one can ever need is included in the appendixes of both volumes. The result will be a ream of paper per child, which one hopes the team can divide and conquer. Any team that can integrate the plethora of data generated by assessment and intervention procedures will certainly be able to facilitate the child's progression in an exemplary way. Every child deserves such a team.

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