



History of The Center for Autism

Founded by Dr. Bertram A. Rutenberg, The Center for Autism was the first treatment center in the country to specifically treat autism. From modest beginnings in 1955 as a state-funded project of the University of Pennsylvania, the Center has evolved into a private, non-profit, autism treatment center that has served the needs and improved the lives of thousands of individuals and families affected by autism.

The Center has continuously been on the cutting edge of autism therapy, applying state-of-the-art theories to real-world practice. It has pioneered non-verbal therapeutic approaches such as music therapy, movement therapy and sensory integration. Today, these approaches are used in autism treatments across the U.S. and the world.

It has also played an important role in two landmark legal cases in which, the outcomes have helped improve the quality of life for autistic and other severely handicapped persons. In both cases, Dr. Rutenberg was instrumental in influencing the outcomes. His expert testimony resulted in the extension of the school year and the number of hours for outpatient psychotherapy for severely handicapped children.

The Center has also made advances in the area of autism assessment. In 1966, it developed the Behavior Rating Instrument for Autistic and Atypical Children (BRIAAC). The BRIAAC was a testing tool specifically geared toward Autism Spectrum Disorders and the prototype for many assessment tools currently in use today. It was hailed worldwide as a significant contribution to the mental health field.

Inclusion of autistic children in the public school system is an ongoing concern. Between 1977 and 1980, with funding from the U.S. Board of Education, the Center developed Project LINK, an integrated program for young autistic children in school settings. Project LINK echoes the Center's own multi-focus approach by combining input from various professionals to evaluate a child's developmental level. This comprehensive approach addresses learning issues and the spectrum of communication, physical, intellectual and emotional needs. This model has been replicated and used by school districts throughout the country.

Along with other healthcare providers, the Center has felt the impact of managed healthcare. In 1997, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare implemented HealthChoices, which required Medicaid recipients to enroll in a managed care plan. Under this new plan, many clients were faced with a decline in efficiency and delivery of service. As a result, the Center developed its Specialized Autism Services (SAS). SAS is a comprehensive, fully integrated, year-round program that is designed to meet the unique needs of autistic individuals. The goal of SAS is to help each client interact with others using a functional communication system, create and sustain meaningful relationships, learn how to interact in various environments, respond to sensory input and handle transitions.

The Center was nationally recognized in 2000 by the American Psychiatric Association for significant achievement in developing a comprehensive program for treating profoundly autistic children. It continues to use this program in daily treatment and services.

Throughout the past 15 years, the number of autism cases in Pennsylvania has risen over 2,000%. In response to this problem, Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare created the Autism Task Force, in which The Center for Autism played a key role. Its final report was published in December 2004 and proposes a new system for individuals living with autism and their families that would make the state a national model of excellence in autism service delivery.

In April 2006, the Center announced another major milestone — it had changed the name and logo to better reflect the services provided for individuals with autism. The former name, "Center for Autistic Children", impressed upon current and prospective clients that it only provided services for children. The change to "Center for Autism" properly reflects its range of services and mission of creating better outcomes for the lives of all individuals affected by autism.