Reviewer's report

Title: Clinical outcomes of an early intervention program for preschool children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a group setting

Version: 1 Date: 20 August 2012

Reviewer: Lindee Morgan

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions:
1. The primary and major concern is that this manuscript presents a quasi-experimental design with no control group. Although it seems important to publish these data (i.e. a preschool intervention for 26 children with ASD), the paper should be reworked to provide a very different framing of the project. The authors need to be entirely transparent regarding the limitation of this research design (i.e. that results could be attributed entirely to maturation). These limitations should be expressed in both the method, results, and discussion sections. Primarily, the authors need to make clear that a causal relationship between ESDM and children's improvement has not been established. Children with ASD often decrease in their scores on the VABS and MSEL in the preschool years so the fact that these children evidenced no regression and, in fact, continued to show growth in these areas is promising. Thus, this observation should be highlighted.

2. In light of the primary concern with research design, it would seem appropriate to frame this manuscript as more of a model program description. It is novel and encouraging that the authors have adapted ESDM for implementation in group settings. The applicability of this model to community-based programs is potentially very promising and should be emphasized. A reframing of this manuscript as a model program description would require a more extensive description of the intervention itself. Details to be added could include: the type of activities that were included in the school day, description of the process for individualized goal-setting, description of parent component (if applicable), explanation of differences between individual and group treatment delivery, etc.

Minor Essential Revisions:
1. It would be useful to include more information on participant demographics, including a table - it would be good to have information on race/ethnicity, parent age, education, etc.

2. The introduction presents a review of ESDM. Because ESDM has not been evaluated in a group preschool setting thus far, the introduction could be improved by adding a paragraph about what is know about preschool, group-administered interventions for children with ASD.

Discretionary Revisions
1. The manuscript would be strengthened by including data on the curriculum checklist that was utilized.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.