Biographical Information

Laura Schreibman is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California, San Diego where she has been on the faculty since 1984. She earned her Ph.D. at UCLA where she focused on the field of behavior analysis and treatment of children with autism. Her research since her degree has continued in the same vein and she currently directs a federally-funded research program focusing on the experimental analysis and treatment of autism. Her general research interests have included the analysis of speech and attentional deficits, generalization of behavior change, parent training, self-management, peer training, and issues of assessment. Her current lines of funded research involve evaluation of pictorial versus verbal communication teaching strategies for very young children with autism (funded by NIMH), development of classroom Pivotal Response Training strategies (funded by the Department of Education), and the development of individualized treatments for children with autism and their families. She also heads a new research program to assess brain correlates to treatment outcome for infants with autism (a Core of an Autism Center of Excellence Award funded by the NIH). She is the author of over 120 research articles and book chapters as well as three books. Her latest book, The Science and Fiction of Autism, published by Harvard University Press, was released in November of 2005.

Presentation Abstracts

Development of Individualized Treatment Protocols for Children with Autism (4 pm)

Autism treatment research consistently shows a great deal of variability in outcome for children receiving even the best of behavioral interventions. While often treatment researchers focus on which treatment may be better overall than another treatment, it is perhaps more useful to focus our efforts not on which form of treatment is “best” overall but rather which treatment protocol is best for a specific child at a particular point in the child’s overall treatment plan. So the question becomes, how do we tailor our treatments to the needs of the individual child? Given the importance of early intervention, how can we make sure we choose the best treatment initially in order to take advantage of this early window of opportunity? This presentation will describe a recent direction of research looking at the moderating effects of specific child characteristics and how this information may inform the selection of specific treatment protocols.

The Science and Fiction of Autism (6 pm)

Autism is unique not only in its constellation of symptoms but in the extent to which it has generated controversy and strong competing factions among those professionally concerned with its understanding and treatment. From the very beginning when Leo Kanner first described autism in 1943, controversies about the specific behavioral and features of the disorder, its incidence, its treatment have raged. Many aspects of the disorder remain highly controversial to this day, and new issues arise regularly. Why the controversies? Controversies are most likely to arise when things are poorly understood and this is certainly the case with autism. While we are much further along in our understanding of the disorder than we were even only a few years ago, there is still a great deal we do not know. There is almost nothing concerning autism about which everyone agrees except for the fact that it is a seriously debilitating disorder pervasively affecting almost all aspects of behavior.

This presentation will review some of the current contentious controversies such as: Do vaccines cause autism? Is there really an autism epidemic? Do special diets help? What are the most effective treatments? Which treatments are bogus? How can parents and other nonprofessionals make sense out of competing claims and become informed consumers of services?