



# More than words

**Fast ForWord, an intervention to improve language and reading, is attracting the attention of an increasing number of parents of children with autism. Gillian Loughran reports**

It was never intended as a specific way of helping children with autism. When Fast ForWord was launched more than a decade ago its purpose was to address a broad range of reading and cognitive problems such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder and auditory processing deficits.

Many children on the autistic spectrum have those difficulties, too, so it was only a matter of time before some of their parents began to sign them up for the intervention. And as it seems they have often

been happy with the results, word of mouth has encouraged other parents to join in.

Fast ForWord has the advantage that it can be delivered by parents at home or by staff in schools, so it can fit relatively easily into daily life. Another plus-point is that it operates via computer, an object of great attraction for many children with autism.

A software-based intervention, it uses exercises in which children identify computer-generated speech sounds. The speech-sound drills are thought to enhance

phonological awareness, consciousness of the sounds that make up words, in children with language problems. It is claimed that the ability to use language can improve as a result, seen in boosted memory, attention, speed of processing and sequencing words, and reading.

But is it worth the expense? The therapy costs around £195 a month per family, plus a £75 set-up fee. There is conflicting research about the benefits of Fast ForWord for children with autism, so there's no guarantee that it will work.

Providers of the intervention point to recent positive research from the US-based Northwestern University, published in October 2010, which assessed the impact of auditory training on children with ASD. The researchers concluded that their results indicated the benefits of training the auditory function of children with ASD. They noted that the program improved neural activity in subcortical and cortical response timing, as well as brain stem activity.

### Language not tested

But will Fast ForWord improve a child's language skills? The Northwestern University study limited its sample to just five children with ASD and six in a control group. All children taking part were high-functioning children with normal intelligence and language abilities. It did not seek to test language ability, but focused instead on identifying neural improvements in auditory processing after training with Fast ForWord.

Critics of Fast ForWord hold up a study from 2008 by The John F Kennedy Center for Research on Development and Disabilities, which reported that Fast ForWord does not 'significantly' improve language skills in children with language disorders. The study, comprising 216 children, none of which had ASD, 'cast doubt on the value of auditory processing training programs, such as Fast ForWord, for improving language skills over and above the improvements achieved through individual language intervention and academic enrichment'.

Ironically, the reason why many parents turn to interventions such

as Fast ForWord is because mainstream approaches have failed their children. In fact, some parents report that in only a relatively short time Fast ForWord has had a greater impact on their children's progress than mainstream methods ever did.

June Goh, parent of a 10-year-old boy on the autistic spectrum, is one of these Fast ForWord advocates. She says that after being on Fast ForWord for three months, her son's listening skills, word articulation and memory improved. Goh, who signed up with Fast ForWord provider Neuron Learning, says: "I don't expect miracles, but I believe that Fast ForWord has increased my son's capacity to learn."

Goh recommends parents to read the book *The Brain That Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge, which presents the scientific theories behind Fast ForWord and convinced her to sign up for the program.

Doidge's book reinforces the message of 'brain plasticity', which has been one of the most exciting ideas to emerge in neuroscience in recent years. He presents evidence that the brain can 'rewire' itself. Like a weak muscle, the brain can be strengthened. Many parents of children with autism are realising that this theory could apply to their child.

Goh explains: "Fast ForWord has shown me that my child can learn despite his autism, and it's offering nourishment and exercise for his brain to learn how to learn."

### Passionate believer

Fast ForWord was developed by the US-based Scientific Learning Corporation, which licences the product to providers in more than 40 countries. The providers teach children, parents and schools how to use it.

Michael Merzenich, founder of the Scientific Learning Corporation and one of a number of scientists who developed Fast ForWord, is a passionate believer that it can help children with autism. He says: "Most changes that are occurring in brains when brains are losing functionality are reversible." This is the sort of thing that parents of a

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child with autism love to hear. He also states: "From a child perspective, most of the limitations that are recorded in the brain of a child, in fact, are improvable."

While that may be true, parents of children with autism are right to ask the question: will Fast ForWord work for my child? Should the fact that ASD children often present with attention, concentration and language issues, along with self-stimulatory behaviours, deter them from starting the program?

John Kerin of Neuron Learning admits that such things can be a barrier, and advises: "Sometimes, it's best to sort out issues that might be affecting a child's health and which are impacting on their ability to focus and learn before using the program." >>

### SEE SUCCESS: tips

As with many interventions for our children, the Fast ForWord program is one of those where you cannot predict how well your child will do unless you try it out. Watching someone else's child on the program would be worthwhile, and letting your own child have a go on the system before signing up is also a good idea.

Question whether your child is ready for the program now, or whether it might be better to wait until he or she is older or completes other interventions. Remember that if your child tends to be tired at the end of a school day, persuading the school to install the program might be a better option than trying to run it at home. Your child would need access to one-to-one help in school whenever they were on the program, and the school would have to be willing to support it.

While success stories are inspiring to hear, every child is different and, for some, even sitting for the required minimum of 30 minutes a day, five days a week, can be too much. Given more time, this situation might change, so parents might want to revisit the idea of signing up for the program at a later date.

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PHOTOGRAPH: 123RF

How long would your child need to be on the program? Knowing the answer to this would give parents an indication of how much to budget. Unfortunately, there is no test that your child can do to determine the answer. Up to 16 weeks appears to be the period quoted for most children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia. However,

Mary Kidson, director of Smart Processing and a parent of a child with autism, believes that children with ASD need longer-term intervention. She reckons those with 'moderate' autism, as a rule of thumb, may be on the program for about six months.

**Excellent results**

A graduate in Environmental Science, Kidson has made a career of providing Fast ForWord after seeing excellent results in her own daughter. She recalls: "I saw dramatic improvements in her ability to process language. Fast ForWord changed it to normal. The results were amazing." Kidson was introduced to the program and trained in its use by Elaine Giles, a London-based provider of Fast ForWord and one of a number of speech-and-language therapists delivering the program.

The consensus among providers Autism Eye has spoken to is to enter the program slowly to help children stay focused. Many parents of children with ASD opt to start their child with 30 minutes a



**Mary Kidson, who began providing Fast ForWord after it helped her daughter make impressive progress**

day, five days a week, and build up slowly to the much-quoted target of 50 minutes a day.

There remains the question of the language ability needed to be able to access the program in the first place. Joyce Kerin, another director of Neuron Learning, says that children with Asperger

syndrome, who commonly present with less severe deficits in communication skills, are "the quickest responders" to Fast ForWord.

But Autism Eye has heard reports of non-verbal children with autism having dramatic improvements in language functioning after being on the program. Gail Landon, special needs teacher at the independent mainstream primary The Roche School in South London, recalls a four-year-old non-verbal autistic pupil becoming verbal after accessing Fast ForWord. Landon, who was also the school's former Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (Senco) and helped set up the program, says: "The child had no language at all at age four. The results for him were amazing."

**One-to-one support**

Parents need to be aware that most children with autism accessing the program will need one-to-one support, whether it is delivered at home or in school.

**"I saw dramatic improvements in my daughter's ability to process language. The results were amazing"**

PHOTOGRAPH: 123RF

say that providers are always available to offer advice if they need it at no extra cost.

Another benefit for children with autism is that they can take a break in between modules, with the option of resuming weeks later when parents feel they are ready and finances allow it.

Some parents choose to kick-start Fast ForWord in the summer, giving their child an outlet during the long school holidays. Smart Processing has identified the appeal of this and has launched promotional offers during school holidays giving three months' support for the price of two.

A number of parents have been fortunate in having their local education authority stump up after having it recommended by an educational psychologist or a speech-and-language therapist as essential to the child's progress. Education authorities have been known to pay for installing the program, training parents and staff in schools, and the monthly consultation fee.

**HIGH-FIVES AND CHOCOLATE BUTTONS: Fast ForWord in schools**

As well as operating from London, Neuron Learning has a base in Cork, Ireland, where parents have been getting companies to sponsor 50 per cent of the costs of running Fast ForWord in schools.

Neuron Learning says that schools wishing to introduce it should budget for £1,000 for initial training and around £2,500 a year for running costs if, for instance, there are around 10 children on the program. Initial training for schools takes around a day, with follow-up training included in the price. This can be carried out online using video conferencing.

Gail Landon, a special needs teacher at the South London-based The Roche School, has children accessing Fast ForWord at 8am, before the school day starts. She believes that when on the program children need a quiet environment, without disruption from other children or adults coming in and out of the ICT room where the program is delivered. Trained assistants work with the children and a special needs teacher oversees the program and liaises with the Fast ForWord consultant.

The Roche School normally puts children on the program for just one term, although some children stay on it for two terms. Landon says children with autism often need longer, and for them "it's a work in progress".

There is no classic model for progress, says Landon. "Different kids make progress in different areas. Often we see improvements in concentration and then reading starts to improve after the program has been introduced. Sometimes we don't see children make a leap until the following term."

Fast ForWord uses a visual reward system, which details his or her score and encourages children to stay motivated. If a child is unable to understand this, the Roche School has found ways around it. Landon suggests: "Sometimes a high-five or a chocolate button is enough to help the child understand that they have succeeded and that it's time to move on."

The program is funded with The Roche School buying the licence to use the software and parents splitting the costs.



**NEVER TOO LATE: working with older children**

Fast ForWord is not just for young children. Parents of older ASD children, and non-verbal older children, are turning to Fast ForWord as well. Usha Patel of Raviv Practice, a Fast ForWord provider, says that a 15-year-old non-verbal client is racing through the program, and doing particularly well with reading.

Joyce Kerin of provider Neuron Learning thinks that schools should consider the program for older children.

"It's not a case of getting them when they're young in order to make a difference," she insists. "One can always work at strengthening the brain."

She points out that Fast ForWord can be set to an individual's skill level to keep a child challenged but not frustrated. Patel agrees, saying: "We can set it to pre-school or nursery level for some children and they can work their way up at their own pace."



**Usha Patel of Raviv Practice with her own child, Nisha**