

What are we targeting when we treat autism spectrum disorder? A systematic review of 406 clinical trials

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The number of research trials aimed at evaluating treatments for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been increasing progressively. However, it is not clear which measures should be used to assess their efficacy (i.e., how well they work), especially for treatments that target core symptoms of ASD (e.g., social communication and interaction difficulties, restricted and repetitive behaviours). This article provides a comprehensive overview of the outcome measures used in clinical trials for people with ASD, between 1980 and 2016 (note: outcome measures are tools used by investigators in clinical trials to decide whether a treatment is having an effect). Our review shows that the evaluation of efficacy in intervention trials for ASD relies on varied and often non-specific tools for this condition. This may mean it is difficult to evaluate comparisons between studies, and it therefore makes it difficult to identify effective treatments for ASD. Greater consensus regarding the choice of tools used in these trials should be reached.