

Is it a scam?

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Statement of the Problem

There are many interventions available for people with disabilities and special education needs. Some have a strong evidence-base and are likely to be effective. Others have little or no scientific evidence to support them and are likely to be ineffective and perhaps even harmful. Teachers and parents need to select interventions that are likely to be effective.

Proposed Solution/ Intervention

There are a number of signs that indicate that an intervention is likely to be ineffective. When teachers and parents are evaluating an intervention it may be helpful to look for the following danger signs or red flags. Not all interventions will have all the danger signs, and some effective interventions may also have some of the signs. It is important to take a sceptical approach and not accept claims at face value.

Red flags

1. The intervention is claimed to be effective for a wide range of problems, for example dyslexia and traumatic brain injury.
2. The intervention is claimed to cure the disability, for example claims that autism spectrum disorders can be cured.
3. The intervention is claimed to be a new breakthrough, to produce immediate results or is described as "astonishing" or "miraculous".
4. The evidence provided to support the intervention is anecdotes and testimonials, not scientific studies.
5. There is only one study that supports the treatment or supporting studies do not include comparisons with other interventions.
6. There is no connection between the intervention and the difficulty it addresses, for example balancing exercises to improve reading.

7. The people who are selling the intervention are the same people completing the assessment to decide if the intervention is suitable.
8. The intervention is not supported by established understanding of the problem it addresses, for example visual problems treated as an intervention for reading difficulty.
9. Professional bodies with relevant expertise do not support the intervention, for example the American Speech-Language Association does not support Auditory Integration treatments.
10. Those promoting the intervention claim it is being suppressed by medical or educational authorities.
11. The intervention is promoted through infomercials, or self-promoting websites and books.
12. The claims make a play on emotion rather than reason.
13. There has been legal action over the intervention.

What should I ask about an intervention?

Is there any scientific research, published in journals, to support the claims?
What are the credentials of the people providing the intervention and the experts recommending the intervention?
What other options are there for the problem?
What are the possible side effects?
Exactly what changes will I see in the child if the intervention is successful? How long will these changes take?
Can I afford it?

The MUSEC verdict

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

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Key references may be found at:
http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co_brief.aspx

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