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AUTISM

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A child is diagnosed as having an autistic disorder if he or she has a pattern of delayed or atypical development in three areas: social interaction, communication, and behavior. Many children with autism also function in the mentally retarded range, but are different from children with uncomplicated mental retardation in the development of their social skills, communication and behaviors. With uncomplicated mental retardation, children go through the same developmental sequence as children with normal intelligence, but they do so at a slower pace, and their development stops at a lower level. Autistic children typically go through the normal sequence of developing some skills, and may actually have excellent abilities in some areas, but lag behind and have unusual developmental features in the key areas of socialization, communication and behavior. The characteristics of each child with autism will differ based on his or her innate personality type, level of intelligence, age and experiences. As children with autism grow and develop, some of the autistic features often improve. This does not change the diagnosis of autism, but does lead to improved functioning. Some of the differences in the social, communication, and behavioral patterns of children with autism are described in the following sections.

Social interaction

The classical description of a child with autism is socially aloof. These children avoid social interaction except when it is necessary to get their needs met. They often behave as if other people are objects, and young children may use an adult's hand like a tool. Group settings often result in high levels of anxiety and difficult behavior. A higher functioning interactive style is labeled socially passive. These children tolerate a certain amount of interaction as long as someone else initiates and sustains the interaction. They may hang out near other children, but do not initiate interaction. They function better with familiar adults and family members than with unfamiliar adults and peers. Passive children may initially be thought of as simply very shy, but the social problems become more obvious as the child gets older. The highest functioning group attempts social interaction, but the interactions tend to be one sided and odd. They are frequently rejected by their peers, which adds to the social difficulties. Young children with this social style often will cause great concern for their safety because of their tendency to approach strangers.

Most children with autism have an unusual pattern of eye contact. A complete absence of eye contact may be seen, but is not necessary for the diagnosis. Many children give eye contact intermittently, but do not use it to assess the response of another person. Some children give too much eye contact, using a fixed stare which leads to discomfort in other individuals. This is sometimes the result of an attempt at training eye contact.

An important social skill is the development of joint attention. This includes pointing, showing, and following someone else's gaze, for the purpose of pointing another person to an object or event, and evaluating their response. It is different from pointing to get something, which many children with autism master. The development of joint attention appears to be a prerequisite for the development of speech as well as social skills.

Communication

The communication skills of children with autism range from a complete lack of verbal and gestural communication to good speech, but difficulty with the social aspects of communication. The first indication that a child has autism may be a lack of language development or the loss of speech after an initial period of normal development. Nonverbal children with autism differ from children with other speech disorders by their poor development of compensatory nonverbal communication strategies. Most children with autism develop unusual speech patterns as they are learning to talk. The most common is echolalia, the repetition of words and phrases in a meaningless way. Many children memorize dialog from cartoons or movies and use it inappropriately in conversation or as self talk. As the child's understanding of language improves, these phrases, along with those learned at home and school may be inserted appropriately into conversation, giving the impression of a higher level of language functioning than the child actually has. This level of language development tends to be quite rigid, with the child demanding that requests, reinforcement or answers to questions be phrased in a specific way. Some children develop repetitive questioning with a limited group of questions which are repeated over and over. The highest level of communication is the development of truly independent speech, with the child forming grammatically correct speech, and able to answer questions appropriately. At this level, the child's ability to communicate is typically the best when the topic of conversation revolves around one of the child's interests.

Behavior and interests

The most obvious autistic behaviors are the motor stereotypies: rocking, spinning, hand flapping and other unusual movement patterns. These are typically seen more frequently in young children, those with a low level of functioning, and children who are excited or under stress. Behaviors such as head banging can lead to injury. Play behaviors are typically delayed and unusual. Low functioning children may avoid toys or play with them in unusual ways, such as lining them up, or sorting them by size and color. As play matures, the toys may be used appropriately in simple ways, such as pushing a car, but the play tends to be repetitive and unimaginative. Many times, the play is a repetition of cartoons or videos. The development of true pretend play, or role playing with other children is quite rare. Some children develop functional play, such as playing with a toy car on a road, but true pretend play involving the use of objects as if they had other properties or identities, such as pretending a stick is a gun is uncommon.

Many children with autism develop a narrow interest or group of interests. The interest may be useful, such as computers, or cleaning and arranging, or obscure, such as airline schedules or the migratory pattern of birds. Many boys functioning in the 4 to 7 year range of development get stuck in violent or gory themes such as monsters, dinosaurs, death, sharks, etc. This generally appears to be an exaggeration of normal developmental interests, and can often be improved by eliminating the child's access to violent TV, cartoons, movies and videos.

Most children with autism function best within a known and stable routine. Some have difficulty with any changes, in routine, in their physical surroundings, or in the people who interact with them. Others can tolerate change if it is explained, and they understand what will happen instead. Many have nonfunctional routines or rituals. These may be exaggerations of normal routines, such as having to arrange all of the toys in a certain way, or nonfunctional, such as shouting "hot potato" when entering the classroom.

Sensory processing issues are also common in autism. Most children with autism will have unusual

responses to sensory input at some time in their development. Sensory differences which are common include a high pain tolerance, hypersensitivity to touch, or sensitivity to loud noises, or certain types of noise like vacuum cleaners. Children with autism frequently seek out sensory experiences such as rocking and spinning, or flashing lights, or the pressure associated with wrestling or even being physically restrained. Identifying a child's sensory needs and sensitivities can improve behavior and participation in both education and family life.

One of the confusing features of the development of children with autism is their tendency to skip certain developmental landmarks. Normally, development progresses in a very predictable pattern, and each new developmental skill builds on other previously learned skills. We expect that if a child is able to do the things that three year olds do, that this child will also be able to do all of the things that two years olds do. We expect that when a child speaks, that he or she understands the meaning of the words he or she is using, and that he or she will understand what you mean when you use those same words to say something to him or to her. In school, we expect that a child who can add and subtract will understand the concept of numbers, and will be able to use concepts like more than, less than and the same. If a child can read words, we expect that he will understand the meaning of what he reads. However, this often does not hold true for autistic individuals. Children with autism may skip some of the developmental building blocks which give the meaning to a developmental skill. For example, an autistic child may learn to speak by echoing phrases which he or she hears without having the underlying word meanings. This may be limited to a few phrases, or may include many sophisticated sounding scripts, but if one speaks to the child at the same level, the child does not understand. A skill which is higher than the overall level of development, is termed a splinter skill. In school, these skills may be seen in calculating or spelling as well as in a variety of nonacademic areas, for example, music or art. Parents and teachers often assume that an autistic child's splinter skill is indicative of a higher overall level of understanding or development than the child actually has, and that one simply needs to find a key to unlock the door to the rest of development. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When these splinter skills are used to develop expectations about how well a child should be functioning, it becomes very frustrating for the child and adult, and the child often responds with difficult behavior.

A confusing and frustrating feature of autistic development is that of developmental plateaus and regression. All children with autism have an uneven developmental profile. That is, some areas of development move along more quickly than others; for example, a child may be functioning at the 4 year level in motor skills, the 2 year level in communication, and the 18 month level in socialization. In addition, development and learning tends to get stuck for periods of time, and may even go backward at times. So a child may be progressing well in one area, but not in another, or may all of a sudden lose skills which he or she had previously mastered. He may also have a recurrence of abnormal behaviors which had disappeared for awhile. After a while, development usually moves forward again for a period of time. Short term regressions are frequently seen in school, but longer regressions also may occur. These tend to affect developmental skills and are easily recognized at home.