

Autism in Children

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Abstract

Review Article

Autistic spectrum disorder is a very common presentation where children present with social communication difficulties. They can have behavioural problems and other times anxiety. Every autistic child is different and they may come anywhere in the autistic spectrum, ranging from sensory difficulties, social adjustment to food, sleep and concentration challenges. The main aim of this article to bring awareness about autism to the society and to give Autistic children help and support to be able to maintain a safe and healthy lifestyle. It is very important to involve a health care practitioner and get the necessary care and advice from the doctor. It is equally important to organize fun interactive games, activities and book reading for children with Autism to help and support them with their difficulties. All of these things can be done with family support and encouragement, however, it can be very challenging and Children with Autism need professional diagnosis, support in community and teachers to guide them.

Keywords: Autism, autism spectrum disorder, sensory difficulties, mental health, neurodiversity, autism assessment clinic, multi-disciplinary team, sleep difficulties, parents guide to autism.

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BACKGROUND AND DEFINITIONS

Autism or autism spectrum disorder describes a difference in the way that a person experiences the world. Some people think of autism as a disability but some people might describe it as a difference. People with autism behave and interact differently with other people.

Autistic children may have difficulties with their social communication and this impacts their interaction with others. They also find it difficult to understand their feelings or how other people think, they may experience anxiety if they do an activity outside of their regular routine or around unfamiliar situations. Most times people with autism do not like bright sounds or lights which can be overwhelming and uncomfortable for them.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is associated with other co-existing conditions which might affect their well-being such as mental health problems, anxiety, behavioural problems, learning disability.

Autistic individuals may also struggle around non-verbal communication and may not understand someone's body language, facial expressions and gestures. They might struggle with conversations and to

engage with other people. Sometimes children with autism can be non-verbal entirely.

Children with autism are most comfortable in a set routine and find it difficult to cope when their routine is affected. They might get a specific certain hobby like collecting coins and become highly focused on it or do repetitive movements.

Children with autism may also have sensory difficulties and might feel overwhelmed with certain senses such as touch, sound, noises, movements, lights. Therefore, people with autism may find it very scary to experience a normal hospital setting with bright lights, activity and movements around and loud medical equipment beeping especially in Accident and Emergency department.

Some autistic people have specific difficulties such as food, sleep and behaviour. autism is also related to mental health as certain individuals might feel low and suffer with anxiety. Some children do not like the texture of certain foods or smells of certain foods. Some children enjoy every food but cannot tolerate with certain foods are all mixed in a plate. Sometimes, the biggest issue can be sleep which causes these children to struggle in school in day time and affects their concentration and focus.

This can lead to gastrointestinal problems such as constipation, diarrhoea, abdominal pain.

Causes of autism spectrum disorder

Sometimes, parents ask me what causes? How did my child get it? Unfortunately, there is no known cause of autism. A lot of research has taken place around this topic and there are more and more awareness courses now. There are certain families where parents are autistic and so are their cousins and children also get diagnosed with autism due to a genetic link. However, you make come across a family where only one person has the diagnosis. Environment also has a role to play and can increase or decrease autism risk. No parents can cause their children to become autistic and it also not possible for one sibling to pass it on to the other.

As per National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines (NICE UK, 2023) there is no obvious cause of autism but genetic and environmental factors have a role to play. There are certain factors that increase the risk of autism such as family history, maternal psychosis, birth defects, chromosomal abnormalities such as Down's syndrome or genetic disorders. Genetic and environmental factors can affect aspects of early brain development and how neurons communication with each other. This gives rise to a term called neurodiversity that humans are all different and have differences in their brain pathway.

Nowadays, there is more awareness and children are being diagnosed early with Autism. However, many patients who I consult tell me think they have autism but never been diagnosed and we refer them to the autism clinic for adults.

Parent Expectations

Sometimes, individuals can fall anywhere in the spectrum and might only have very minor difficulties with sensory problems or behaviour while others many have all the traits of autism. Some children or adults with autism may need very little support. In other situations, patients many have autism alongside attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and may have more complex social needs. It is also linked to mental health and as a clinician you should be mindful if children are feeling low or getting anxiety and panic attacks and should refer them early to mental health team.

Sadly, there is still a stigma to autism parents are concerned or upset when their child has been diagnosed with autism. Autism is not a disease or illness; it is a difference of how they perceive the world and sometimes may require different needs to be met as compared to other children but it does not mean they are "bad" children if they behaviour or anxiety is not clear for us to understand.

Another important thing for us health professionals it to make people understand that there is

no cure or quick fix of autism. Once you are diagnosed with autism, it is there for your life. Most people under autistic spectrum lead full lives, go to school, get an education, find jobs and maintain a relationship with their families and partner. They have families and children and can lead very full lives.

Pathway of diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder

It is important to get referred early if parents have any concerns. When parents have concerns about their child or school flags up certain autistic traits, it is important for parents to visit the doctor for referral. Parents are asked to fill in a questionnaire the Autistic Spectrum Quotient as part of the referral. Initially the child should be seen by a Paediatric consultant they make a further detailed assessment. If the child meets the criteria, they are then referred for a further diagnostic clinic (ADOS clinic This is a 2–3-hour long assessment which is led by consultant paediatrician, speech and language therapists.

I visited the assessment clinic and was lucky to interact with all these clinicians. It takes places in a big room and has many different activities. They play with the child and do different interactions to assess their social skills, communication and understanding of language, role play, and preferences and highlight their difficulties. This assessment can be between 2-4 hours long according to the patient. After this assessment they do a multi-disciplinary team meeting (MDT) and diagnose whether the child has autism or he is on the spectrum at all.

I asked the team why a diagnosis of autism is so important. They told me it is extremely important for others to be aware of that patient's diagnosis as people with autism can suffer with anxiety and it's important for parents, teachers and society to understand how to communicate and meet the needs of that individual. Hard work is being put in to make society more aware about Autism and how to deal with these individuals.

The key is also how to guide the parents for example put up visual aids such a large calendar to re-enforce routine and put big stickers up for 1st day of school. Then the parents can show the child the large sticker every day and slowly the child will start to understand and plan about upcoming first day of school.

Community support available for ASD

The most obvious and useful website is the National Autistic Society which is quite useful knowledge hub for parents. <http://www.autism.org.uk/>

Parents and families can also take part in courses. It can be taken by children or young people diagnosed with Autism as well as those on the diagnosis journey. The course focus is on Exploring Autism, how people with autism view the world "the world through

their eyes” communication, social skills, senses, well-being and emotional regulation and behaviour.

Other examples which can help autistic children at home or playground are things such as trampoline, balls, spinning bowls to help children engage and these sensory strategies help their attention span to increase.

There are also useful books to support Autism such The Autistic Spectrum by Lorna Wing, Thinking in Pictures by Temple Grandin, talking with your child about their Autism Diagnosis by Raelene Dundon, A Volcano in my Tummy helping children to handle their angry, The Social Skills Picture Book, A book what Autism can be like by Sue Adams.

There are also board games or social games such as a mad glad sad game. Approach a child and ask. “What was Mad, Glad or Sad about the day for you?” This would make them understand their feelings. TED talks, such as this one by Rosie King, who has a diagnosis of autism and thinks society should be doing more to celebrate human diversity.

Sometimes sleep can also affect young people which then has a dramatic effect on their day and they suffer at school. There as a detailed booklet that we can sign post Parents to. It is called Strategies to Improve Sleep in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Parent’s Guide’ is a booklet that contains strategies to help with sleep issues in children and young people with autism spectrum disorder: <http://www.autismspeaks.org/docs/sciencedocs/atn/sleep-tool-kit.pdf>

Children with autism can struggle with sensory needs and can get overwhelmed with loud noises or loud sounds. They can find it hard to communicate their needs. There is a service where you can rent or buy sensory toys for such children on www.essexice.co.uk Some communication equipment can also be borrowed for free.

Also useful are autism activity groups for whole families to attend and offer sensory and outdoor play, youth groups, summer activity camps and arrange trips for autistic young people to farms, cinemas and trampoline parks etc. Very important to support children with drawing, writing, maths, sensory play and involve children in activities such as the 30-day Lego challenge etc.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot of information and support out there for children with autism, however, the main gap is awareness. As Physicians it is our responsibility to make families at ease with new autism diagnosis and turn the story to the positive side. There is tremendous help available in community, in schools, youth groups,

information courses, books and other resources all highlighted in this article. We can offer all of these resources while parents are awaiting diagnosis and given them some hope for the future.

SUMMARY AND KEY POINTS

- Children with autism behave differently and interact differently with the world. They struggle with social communication and find it hard to understand emotions.
- Children with autism could be anywhere on the spectrum, some may have few difficulties such as feeding or sleeping difficulties while other many have a wider range of problems from social communication to sensory difficulties to behaviour issues.
- There is no known cause of autism yet found but environmental and genetic factors can influence this.
- It is important to refer the child early and give support. It is important to involve family, friends and teachers.
- Many resources available for autism online as highlighted in this article such as books, courses, sensory toys, activities available for children with autism. Children with autism should be supported as per their needs in the community while awaiting diagnosis and specialist review.
- Autism is not an illness and we should aim to think about it in a positive way while spreading awareness about autism.

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