

Introduction to Autism and the Core Impairments





Prevalence

Internationally Autism affects I in 110 children.



- 7665 children with Autism will be born in SA every year.
- Therefore every week 160 will be born, and every day 23 children with Autism will be born.
- That is almost one child every hour

Autism Facts

- •Autism is a complex spectrum of disorders. There is more than one "type", of Autism therefore we refer to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)
- All ASD's are lifelong, complex developmental disorders affecting to varying degrees social behaviour and communication
- Affects 4 5 times as many boys than girls
- Can occur along with any other diagnosable condition (comorbidity)



Three Diagnostic Hallmarks

All Autism Spectrum Disorders are defined and diagnosed as conditions in which an individual must present with:

- I. Impairment in Social Interaction
- II. Impairment in Communication
- III. Presence of Restricted, Repetitive and Stereotyped behaviour patterns, limited Interests and Activities. (Rigid Thinking)

(DSM IV 2000) a;sa

Social Interaction

- Seem indifferent to others, and may not respond to social interaction or affection.
- May seem 'cocooned' or 'in own world'.
- Fail to develop meaningful relationships with parents, siblings and later on, friends.
- •May have an unusual gaze, or make limited eye contact.
- Difficulty with Social Concepts such as privacy and tact.
- Withdrawn or Aloof vs. Active but Odd



Communication

Difficulty understanding the meaning and importance of the communicative process.

- 50% of People with ASD do not develop speech
- For those who do speak, there may still be limitations
 - Echolalia
 - Pragmatics
- Limited use of gestures
- Difficulties with expressive and receptive communication

Rigid Thinking

Limited repertoire of interests:

Often have obsessions or 'special interests' (Thomas the Tank Engine, Cars, Dinosaurs) which are engaged in repetitively

The nature of these interests will be more obsessive and enduring then a typical hobby, and can become a barrier towards learning





May display rigid adherence to seemingly 'non-functional' routines or rituals

May not know how to 'play'. Will rather stack, line up or focus on details of the toy.

Will often 'play' with the same toys, in the same repetitive manner



Stimming:

These are repetitive self-stimulatory behaviours such as flapping objects spinning things, moving the fingers in front of the eyes etc. (these too can become obsessive and 'mesmerising')

Desire for Sameness:

Resistant to change. Require sameness, predictability and routine in order to feel secure within the world.



The Autism Spectrum

As a spectrum disorder, the impairments of the triad can occur to various degrees of severity.

Every person diagnosed as having Autism will have an individual combination of symptoms, characteristics and severity.

- ■75% of individuals on the spectrum also have some degree of intellectual impairment (mild to severe)
- ■25% of people with an Autism have **no intellectual impairment**. These individuals are classified as having **Asperger's syndrome**.

Autism Myths

- Caused by poor parenting
 - Kanner's Refrigerator Mother hypothesis

- All people with ASD are Savant
 - Only 2% of the population of people with ASD possess a single, almost 'superhuman' skill or ability that is stark contrast to an overall generally impaired level of functioning



Causes of Autism

- Research is on-going
- Dominant theory suggests a genetic predisposition which may then be triggered by various environmental factors.
 - Environmental toxins
 - Chemical Exposure

• It seems that there is not a environmental trigger of ASD, but a possible few conditions that predispose an individual to Autism (Baron Cohen & Bolton 1993)

ASD and the Senses

- Sensory processing difficulties and distortions are widely recognised to be an additional characteristic of ASD.
- Effects include hyper/hypo sensitivities to touch, sounds, smell, visual stimuli such as bright colours and tastes.
- May appear that the individual is either too sensitive, or not aware of sensations of pain, extreme temperatures, offensive smells etc...
- ASD, behaviour and sensory issues are interrelated.

Theory of Mind/ 'Mind blindness'

Theory of Mind is the ability to consider other people's thoughts and feelings; to understand that others have feelings different to our own; and to understand that our actions affect others.

- This skill plays a major role in being able to interact with others and be social.
- To not have Theory of Mind is known as Mind Blindness.





- Tactlessness
- Lack of empathy and kindness
- Lack of consideration of others feelings
- Difficulty in keeping a conversation flowing and reciprocal
- Difficulty predicting how others may behave in a given situation



ASD and Treatment

- There is currently no known cure for ASD
- Early intervention can improve prognosis and outcomes
- Multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary, individualised.
 - School that utilises ASD teaching methods, principals and philosophies (TEACCH, SPELL)
 - Communication interventions
 - OT and speech therapy
 - Medical
 - Biomedical



ASA Services

- Assessment Clinic
- Outreach programme reaching schools, hospitals and the community
- Resources in the form of brochures, booklets and a library.
- call us on 011 484 9909 or visit our website

www.autismsouthafrica.org



References

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