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Introduction to Autism

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Autism Spectrum Disorders refers to a group of neuro behavioral disorders characterized by impairments in Social Communication and accompanied with stereotypic patterns of thought and behavior. The term Spectrum is used to refer to the varied characteristics. These range from mild social communication issues to severity in symptoms and learning difficulties

Nature of the disability of the child with Autism is very intriguing and may limit the child's ability to learn in the ordinary way. Very often the term Autism is used to represent the entire spectrum.

Autism is a lifelong condition that appears typically within the first three years of life. It is a spectrum disorder and children with this diagnosis can be affected in very different ways. It is defined and diagnosed medically from its characteristics pattern of behaviors. Eighty percent affected are males; it is a population based disorder and therefore occurs across all communities in the world in the same manner and incidence.

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Symptoms range from a mild learning and social disability to a severe impairments. Some children with autism do not ever develop speech, while others are verbal but are limited in their use of language to communicate. Still others may have excellent language and intelligence but they too have difficulties in social cognition.

In the eighties Lorna Wing coined the term “Triad of Impairments” to define Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to her, in the population of the developmentally disabled there are some persons who exhibit a range of symptoms that can be classified as difficulties under the following three areas-

Qualitative impairments in Language and communication.

People with autism have a fundamental impairment in communication, which goes beyond just speech. Thus a person with autism is unlikely to develop additional or compensatory communication skills. However, this does not mean that these skills can never be taught.

The individuals with Autism may have delay, deviances (unusual) or total lack of spoken language accompanied with an extreme lack of usage of alternative modes of communication, like gestures, eye gaze, body postures etc.

Many of them may be having speech. However, there may have oddities such as –

- Echolalia: In this the individual with ASD tends to repeat what others say . Example- when asked “ what is your name?”, the child may answer “ what is your name?”
- Pronoun reversal- may use, “I”, for others and, “You”, for addressing self.
- Repetitive usage of language: They may use language in a repetitive manner and keep repeating a phrase, sentence or a question again and again.
- Monotonous tone usage: Speak in manner without any variation in the intonation. Their speech often sounds flat, too loud or too soft.
- inability to understand abstract language : The individual with ASD often have an inability to understand abstract language and literal understanding of language. Abstract words like kindness, powerful, pity may be difficult to understand. Proverbs, jokes, sarcasm and idioms are difficult to understand.

- Difficulty in understanding language literally: The individuals with ASD have difficulty in understanding language literally prevents them from understanding the intended meaning. For example, the teacher goes to Rishi, (a child with Autism) who is standing outside his class and says, 'don't you want to go back to your seat and finish your work'. Rishi may say, "no" . Rishi does not understand what the teacher intends to say within the sentence (The teacher is actually trying to convey-go and finish work).

Qualitative Impairments of Social Interaction

There is an impaired, deviant and extremely delayed social development-especially in the interpersonal skills. One can see a range of **Social Behaviors** across the spectrum. The individuals can be classified according to their **Social Behaviors** also. The classifications are as follows:

1. **Aloof type**. They seem to 'be in a world of their own'.
2. **Passive Type**: There are others who form the "**passive**" group and in this group, the child accepts social approaches but seldom or never initiates an approach. He may become involved as a passive part of a game.
3. **Active but odd group**. Children of this group make active approaches to others but make that contact in strange ways.
4. **The over-formal**, stilted group that is seen in later life, this behavior is common in the most able persons with autism. The following characteristics tend to be displayed:

Finally, there are other categories also such as

- Excessively polite and formal;
- Have a good level of language;
- Try very hard to stick to the rules of social interaction without really understanding them.

Besides the difference in social behaviors that individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) may have as stated above there are some other social difficulties that individuals on ASD may have. An individual with ASD may have many of these difficulties but they may not necessarily have all of these difficulties.

1. Limited understanding of emotions.
2. Lack of social reciprocity (turn taking)
3. Lack of spontaneity in sharing enjoyment, interest and achievement.
4. Lack of understanding of social conventions including maintaining topics, judging the interest level of another person in a conversation.
5. General difficulty in understanding simple unwritten social rules that others learn naturally by imitation of the social environment. Example- maintaining appropriate physical distance in a social interaction, waiting for turn in a shop, using polite language, understanding privacy and thereby show appropriate behavior like closing the toilet door, covering self and coming out after a bath , touching self in private etc.

Inflexibility in thought and Behavior

One of the characteristics of autism is the inability to play or engage in imaginative activities. So a toy truck becomes a play thing only in as much as the spinning of a wheel provides stimulation. Some more able people with autism develop a sequence of events which appear to be play but close observation shows the sequence is often repeated over and over again. Other symptoms of inflexibility of thought and related odd behaviors are given below:-

- Play with parts of toys like wheels of a car, strings, push buttons, spinning things etc.
- Take interest in unusual activities and items like lining up, stacking things .the interest is extreme in intensity and focus.
- Move body in a stereotypic manner – rocking back and forth, flapping hands, flicking fingers, spinning etc.
- Have extreme need for sameness, resist any changes in routines.
- Perform non functional rituals and routines like wanting to do activities in the same order, choosy about clothes and food etc.
- Seem Unaware of dangers and may be scared of otherwise safe things like a balloon, candle, stuffed toy etc.
- May laugh or cry suddenly for no obvious reason.