

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Autism



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Autism is a brain disorder that affects 1 out of every 500 people. This disorder is also four to five times more common in males than in females, although females suffering from autism will develop more severe symptoms and will have greater intellectual difficulties. There is no cure for autism but if diagnosed early in life and proper intervention is received, individuals can overcome and deal with the symptoms.

In order to be diagnosed as autistic, there must be clear evidence of limited social relationships, underdeveloped communication skills, and repetitive behaviors. All of the symptoms must occur prior to three years of age. Symptoms usually occur anywhere from 18-36 months old. Parents will notice their child not wanting to be cuddled or held. Other symptoms may include avoiding eye contact; not responding to noises, sounds, or their name; physically attacking themselves or others; remaining fixated on a particular object or activity; lack of pain sensation; and the most noticeable symptom is the delay in language development or the sudden cessation of speaking.

Autistic children have a difficult time forming relationships and communicating with others. Their facial expressions usually do not match their feelings. Another characteristic autistic children display is the sensitivity to sounds, tastes, textures, and smells. Research has shown that their brains are unable to correctly balance the senses. Certain sounds and textures may drive autistic individuals into screaming rages or to the point of hurting themselves or others.

One form of intervention that has been extremely beneficial for helping autistic children develop appropriate behaviors is the Dr. O. Iovac Lovaas' intensive behavioral therapy. This intervention consists of children being rewarded for appropriate behaviors and being punished for inappropriate behaviors. Consistency is not only important in autistic children's lives but also in Dr. Lovaas' therapy. The child must

always receive rewards for appropriate behavior and punishments for inappropriate behaviors, even in public.

Drugs are also used to control inappropriate behaviors. Clomipramine or some of the SSRIs (selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors) are used to help control repetitive behaviors. Meds classified as psychostimulants may be helpful for aggression. Drugs should not be used as the only intervention when trying to overcome the symptoms of autism. It is very important for parents of autistic children to find an intervention program that is going to fit their child and themselves properly. Also, the more therapy the child receives the sooner the appropriate behaviors will be displayed and the sooner the child may lead a "normal" life. Appropriate educational interventions should be sought out to foster acquisition of basic, social, communicative, and cognitive skills.

Adults can and do live with autism. The help they require is dependent upon their intellectual abilities. Some adults may need more help than others. There are programs to give these individuals the help they need.

It is very important to diagnose this disorder as early as possible so intervention may be started. Scientists are trying to identify irregular genes to help them diagnose autism before the symptoms occur. Until then, it is very important that parents are informed of the latest updates on autism so they can help their child live a normal life. Parents should also be careful of what they read and trust. The Autism Society of America as well as other credible sources take the time to properly research autism. Parents must accept the fact that there is no cure for autism, but there are interventions that will help their child deal with the symptoms associated with autism.

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