



Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism has been known about for almost 100 years. The term comes from Greek words, “autos” meaning self and “ismos” meaning condition. This then is translated as meaning turning inward. I believe that Autism is best described as *a condition in which the affecter person is locked within themselves*. The key, then, is to unlock their brains so that they can interact with their environment and communicate with the world.

Autism occurs in about 5 per 10,000, it appears to be increasing in frequency in recent years there has been a change in the definition of autism, more broader and therefore more children meet the criteria for diagnosis. We have seen children with lesser forms be classified and diagnosed. Most likely the numbers have not increased as much as the definitions changed and reporting more accurate.

Cardinal Signs of Autism include the following three:

- Lack of Speech
- Atypical behaviors, often repetitive
- Difficult socialization.

These are very broad.

Other “Red Flags” for Autism include:

- Unusual speech with repetition of certain sounds
- Inability to relate to others
- Random, repetitive nonfunctional behaviors
- Poor eye contact
- Fascination with spinning, water, mirrors, ceiling fans
- Absence of pointing to show or requesting anything
- Lack of interest in baby games such as peek-a-boo
- Lack of response to parents
- The history of never crying as an infant

These are only some of the symptoms but should alert parents and families regarding autism. The diagnosis is made by meeting criteria as set forth by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 4th edition, published in 2000. There is not blood test, CAT scan, MRI scan or any other test that can diagnose these conditions. We currently do not know the cause. There is strong scientific support for a genetic inheritance though it cannot be explained totally by this. The search continues.



Other terms to be familiar with include Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Development Delay. Asperger's Syndrome includes many autistic symptoms including the repetitive behaviors and social interaction impairment. Most children with Asperger's have appropriate speech. Pervasive Development Delay is a term used to describe a child with symptoms of all three cardinal signs of Autism but does not meet criteria to diagnose it. Over time many of these children with meet criteria. This group of children appears to have a high functioning autism.

No cure has been found. There is treatment for Autism. Below I have outlined the treatment modalities for Autism.

Behavior Modifications

Over the years behavior therapies have been shown to make great strides in the treatment of Autism. Applied Behavior Analysis, referred to as ABA is used by many to improve the communicative ability of children with Autism. ABA is about altering the environment so that Autistic children may learn quicker in spite of their deficiencies. Desired behaviors are rewarded quickly and immediately. ABA can be time consuming and sometimes overwhelming for families.

Occupational Therapy

Most children with Autism have trouble with sensory integration. Often they are too easily affected by different sensory input, like touch, smells and noise. They may become locked on a motion that removes them from the environment. OT can help relieve some of these sensory symptoms.

Educational Programs

Children with Autism need aggressive educational programs. These children can learn but are often impaired by the environment of school. Special resource classrooms need to be used to encourage education. These children need to be protected from punitive discipline that can be quite damaging.

Other forms of treatment have been used and tried including Vitamins, Chelation, Secretin and many more. These "alternative" treatments are often expensive and have little science back up their use. I encourage families to protect their checkbooks from unproven treatments.

Medications have been used as an adjunct to treatment. There are 4 types of medicines that have been used with some benefit. These do not offer a cure but possible relief of some symptoms.

Over Arousal State

Many children with Autism are over aroused.

Medications that may be used to decrease hyper arousal state:
Clonidine and Tenex.

Poor Attention and Hyperactivity

Autistic children that are having difficulty learning because of hyper arousal or inattention.

Psycho Stimulant Medications such as Ritalin may be used to increase attentiveness.



Anxiety and Being Unable to let go of Behaviors Some children are helped by Prozac or other SSRI's to disinhibit their anxiety or repetitive behaviors. Sometimes Prozac can also disinhibit speech and facilitate speech development. Buspar can be used for anxiety as well.

Aggression Risperdal has been used to decrease aggression in Autistic children, where behavior therapy has not been successful.

None of these, offer a cure and none of these should be used without proven treatments as well.

Books

"Facing Autism: Giving Parents Reasons For Hope And Guidance For Help" – Lynn Hamilton

"Let Me Hear Your Voice" – Catherine Maurice

"Quirky Kids" – Perri Klass and Eileen Costello

"Thinking In Pictures And Other Report From My Life With Autism" – Temple Grandin

"Activity Schedules For Children With Autism: Teaching Independent Behavior" – Lynn McClannahan & Patricia Krantz

Websites

- Autism Society of America - www.autism-society.org
- Autistics.org - www.autistics.org
- Autism Network International: www.autreat.com
- TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children: www.teacch.com

Joseph C. Stegman, M.D.
George W. Hatley, PA-C

Maricela Dominguez Gulbranson, M.D. F.A.A.P.
Angela Noone, CPNP

Mark C. Clayton, M.D.

301 Medical Park Drive, St 202B, Concord, NC 28025

Phone: 704-403-2626 | Fax: 704-403-2699 | www.behavioralpediatrics.com