

A Spectrum of Friends:

An overview of autism and tips for a relationship with someone with autism.

By: Ginger Yarbrough, QDDP

Some History of Autism

- Autism was “discovered” in 1943 by Leo Kanner
 - Dr. Kanner’s description was the basis for today’s diagnosis procedures
- Asperger’s Syndrome was “discovered” in the 1950s, when Dr. Aspergers described children that spoke like “little professors”

Frequency and Causes?

- 1 out of 150 children are diagnosed with autism. One child every 20 minutes is diagnosed with autism
- There is no known cause at this time
- Some theories include:
 - Genetics
 - Prenatal viral infections
 - Environmental factors
 - Vaccines...this is widely debated though

Autism by Definition

- A communication/developmental disability that causes differences in the way information is processed. This difference affects the ability to:
 - Use language to communicate
 - Interact with their environment, including other people
 - Process sensory information (i.e. sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch)

What autism is not...

- Autism is not a disease
- Autism is not contagious, you cannot catch it
- Autism is not *Rainman*
- Autism is not Mental Retardation, although it is often dually diagnosed

What you may notice...

- Differences in communication
- Socially interacting with peers and others
- Behaviors and responses to environment
- Thought process and in turn learning

Communication

- Total lack of or delay in development of spoken language without compensation in another way
 - May only use a handful of words
 - May have previously developed language, then language “disappears”
 - Make up own language...similar to babbling

Communication

- If someone with autism has language, they may exhibit difficulties in conversing with others
 - May not be able to initiate or maintain a conversation
 - Do not use many gestures or inability to integrate gestures into conversation appropriately
 - Do not understand the point of language

Communication

- Someone with language may have repetitive or stereotyped language
 - May repeat words or phrases
 - Ask the same questions over and over again
 - Talk like little adults or in a very formal tone

Communication

- Lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or imitative play
 - Do not mimic sounds or actions
 - Not copy play with peers or parents
 - Stick to the same play routine
 - Little creative or imaginative play

Some Communication Tips

- **Just say it.**
 - Kids with limited verbal skills, many times have great receptive language
 - Language should be clear, concrete, and stated simply.
 - If a child with autism asks for something, say it back to them
- **If the child can read, write it down**
 - Write down what you want the child to do
 - To-do lists and written schedules can help prevent confusion
- **Use pictures/photos**
 - If you do not have a photo or picture, draw it
 - Children can use picture cards to show you what they need too

Communication Tips




- Use an object
 - For example, if it is time to eat, show the child a fork or spoon
 - Objects are the simplest way to communicate

Visual Examples of Communication Techniques



School Days	✓	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	✓
Bedroom:							
Get dressed	✓						✓
Put dirty clothes in laundry	✓						✓
Bathroom:							
brush teeth	✓						✓
Comb hair	✓						✓
Kitchen:							
put on/tie shoes	✓						✓
get backpack	✓						✓
homework signal?	✓						✓
get coat	✓						✓
get lunchbox	✓						✓
SMILE 😊!	✓						✓

I want

 big wheel	 golf	 trampoline
 bubble blower	 sand and water table	 sidewalk chalk



Social Differences

- Failure to develop relationships with peers
 - Usually happy when left alone
 - Tend to only want to interact if it is related to their interest
 - Little to no initiation of interacting with others

Social Differences

- Lack of seeking to share enjoyable experiences
 - Little Joint attention
 - Limited eye-gaze/referencing
 - Little show and tell
 - May not point out something that they find interesting

Social Differences

- Lack of social or emotional reciprocity
 - No desire to continue interacting with others
 - Hard to participate in turn-taking games or sharing with others
 - May not recognize others' faces
 - May not be able to see others' points of view

Social tips

- You are here to be a fun social outlet
- Be creative to encourage social interaction
- Use their interests to facilitate social interaction
- People with autism will pick up on anxiety, apprehension, or irritation. Just relax.
- Treat someone with autism as you would anyone else; with respect and dignity. i.e. no baby talk with a 16 year-old person.

Differences in Behaviors

- “Odd” or complex body movements repetitively
 - Hand flapping, wringing
 - Toe walking
 - Can be a good sign or a warning sign that they are not happy about something

Differences in Behaviors

- Preoccupation with an interest that is abnormal in intensity or focus
 - Tend to stick to one subject
 - Know a large amount about one particular subject
 - The subject that the person is interested in may be out of the norm (i.e. heavy metal music, illnesses, fans, etc)

Differences in Behaviors

- Develop and follow a strict routine or ritual
 - Almost appears to be obsessive-compulsive disorder
 - Must have things in their order that may not make any sense to anyone else
 - May have a melt down over small changes
 - Rigid in these routines

Differences in Behaviors

- More interested in parts of an object
 - Disassemble objects
 - May focus on toy car wheels instead of using it as intended
 - May focus on this for long periods of time
 - Makes them happy even though they are not using an object for the intended purpose
 - May collect things in hand/pocket, or at home

Behavior Tips

- Although these children may have unique needs, they are still able to use what works for them to fill the needs; that may include some not too pleasant means.
- Talk to the parents to find out if there is anything you should avoid...any triggers, any behaviors that should not occur, etc
- Ask parents for warning signs that someone may becoming upset
- Ask parents for pointers for if your class member becomes upset
- Some kids just need a break.

Environmental Influences

- While not in the definition or diagnosis of autism, many people with autism have sensory differences
 - May not respond to sudden noises
 - May be overly sensitive
 - May seek out certain items (i.e. textures, sights, etc)

Sensory Tips

- Try not to wear too much perfume or cologne
- Dim the lights. Florescent lights can bother some people due to the flicker or noise.
- Some kids just need a big hug...but this is not a good idea for other kids
- Steer clear of rough, slimey, or irritating textures
- Some children may not feel or be bothered when they are hurting. Keep an eye out for illness and/or physical pain if the child seems inconsolable.
- Ask Parents if there are certain things that irritates their child – ex. Music, foods, noises, smells, etc.
- Some children have no tolerance for certain pitches.

How does this apply to you?

- Scenarios...

- You are working with a child that loves video games. He is supposed to be listening to a story in a group, but is distracted by the computers and is wanting to play a game.
- Billy is in your class and he is trying to take Sam's snack. You keep calling Billy back over to the group, but Billy seems to be ignoring you.

More Scenarios

- A child is trying to touch you inappropriately, lift your shirt, etc.
- Michael is in your class. He does not talk. He loves Thomas the Tank Engine. As the other kids are laughing and talking with each other, Michael sits quietly on the floor playing with trains. How do you respond?

One last scenario...

Jamie is in your class. Jaime is a 4 year old girl that can tell you what she wants with her words most of the time. She loves gummy bears. Jaime's mother sends a pack of gummy bears with Jaime every Sunday. Jaime will start screaming when she wants gummy bears. How do you respond?

Questions?

- Remember this is a time for kids to come together and celebrate God. Enjoy the time that you spend with your class/fellow church member. ALL kids, including kids with unique needs, are a blessing and should be viewed and treated as such.



Thank you!!!

Call or email me if you have any questions...

Ginger Yarbrough

gyarbrough@compart.org

(919) 413-1549