

Demystifying the Puzzle of Autism

By Carol L. Spears and Vicki L. Turner

A Positive Approach to Autism

The hopes, aspirations, goals, and dreams parents hold for their children are typically replaced by a grieving process of despair and fear when a diagnosis of a Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) is declared by a member of the medical or educational community. Based upon extensive experience providing services to individuals with autism, authors Spears and Turner, however, are able to offer support, lend encouragement, and recommend effective strategies to improve communication, learning, behavior, and social skills of these individuals. Implementation of approaches that have been proven effective allows individuals with autism to realize their true potential, and affords parents the luxury of establishing positive outlooks for the future, just as all parents do by demystifying the puzzle of autism.

Defining Autism: The First Piece of the Puzzle

Autism is a neurological condition that falls under the umbrella of PDD which is a category of neurological diseases characterized by delay or deviance in their social, language, and/or cognitive development (APA, 2000). Autism is one of five disorders that falls under the broad category of PDD which includes: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Asperger syndrome, Rett's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (NICHCY, 2010).

Characteristics of Autism

Autism typically appears during the first three years of life and is reflected by these characteristics:

- Marked impairment in non-verbal behavior, the ability to develop peer relationships, and social or emotional reciprocity
- Impaired communication marked by delayed or lack of speech, which may result in learning to use alternative-augmentative communication (AAC)
- Restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities (APA, 2000).

Autism Interventions: Fitting the Pieces Together

In their book, *Rising to new heights of communication and learning for children with autism*, authors Spears and Turner (2011) provide parents, educators, speech-language pathologists (SLP) and other interventionists treating children with communication disorders, poor social skills and disruptive behavior with specific, proven-effective strategies. The strategies (described briefly below) address the two primary challenges facing individuals with autism and their caregivers: communication disorders and behavior problems.

Alternative-Augmentative Communication (AAC) is the use of various techniques, strategies, and materials to enhance or replace severely impaired expressive communication abilities. These strategies may include communication binders, topic pages, communication wallet, sign language, gestures, written messages, and speech generating devices.

Integrating Visual Strategies into the classroom or home, increases comprehension, independent functioning, and on-task-behavior (Spears & Turner, 2011). Examples of visual supports include schedules, choice boards, calendars, If/Then boards. Use of visual strategies provides information, expectations, and predictability, while reducing apparent noncompliance, disruption, tantrums, or other off-task behaviors in individuals with autism and other PDDs.

It is the responsibility of the adult working with individuals with autism, whether it is the parent, classroom teacher, or SLP, to structure the environment so they will know the answers to the following questions: 1. *Where do I need to be?* 2. *What do I need to do?* 3. *How much do I need to do?* 4. *What comes next?* 5. *When will I be finished?*

Equipped with appropriate responses to the above questions leads to reduced anxiety, ability to complete tasks, and improved behavior. Using appropriate strategies to improve behavior, communication, learning and social skills, such as those described in this article, are instrumental in rendering the disorder of autism less puzzling.

References

American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2000), Diagnostic Criteria for 229.00 Autistic Disorder (DSM-IV-TR). Arlington, VA: APA.

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