



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

For more resources on autism and caring for your child, please feel free to refer to the following:

The American Academy of Pediatrics

www.aap.org

*See Children's Health Topics – Autism

Department of Health and Human Services – Department for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/

*See Autism Information Center

SNRP State Resource Links

*See Early Intervention program for your state.

SNRP National Resource Links

*See autism related links under “disability specific organizations”.

Parenting Guidelines for Parents of Autistic Children

By Linda Jorgensen

Recently we've received a high volume of e-mail here at SNRP asking about parenting guidelines for families raising autistic children. As one parent put it, “...how come I can buy a toy, a piece of furniture, or a garden tiller and get at least an instruction sheet but no one can tell me what to do with my son? I get more information from my car owner's manual regarding my car than I can find for my child's medical situation. I'm so frustrated”.

Thirty five years ago the word Autism was not a common word in the English vocabulary. Most individuals with unidentified difficulties in communication, behavioral quirks and other symptoms were often misdiagnosed as being mentally retarded, Schizophrenic or developmentally delayed. It wasn't until the late 1970s, early 1980s that Autism became a recognized diagnosis although properly diagnosed cases were low in number.

For example, *Mosby's Medical & Nursing Dictionary 1983 edition* defines Autism as, “a mental disorder characterized by extreme withdrawal and an abnormal absorption in fantasy, accompanied by delusion, hallucination, and the inability to communicate verbally or to otherwise relate to people. Schizophrenic children are often autistic.”

Given what medical professionals know now this is a very outdated definition.

Department of Health and Human Services Center for Disease Control and Prevention provides the following current definition,

“Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities defined by significant impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests. Many people with ASDs also have unusual ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to different sensations. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary – from gifted to severely challenged. ASD begins before the age of 3 and lasts throughout a person's life. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups and is four times more likely to occur in boys than girls.”

The amount of newer information is startling.

Most health care professionals are beginning to understand what Autism is and the treatment strategies needed to identify, diagnose and treat individuals with the disorder. Protocols and strategies have been developed by The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association to assist physicians in the identification, diagnosis and treatment of autism and autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

No two children with autism (ASDs) are exactly alike. Each child must have a treatment program and parenting plan designed to meet their own specific needs as well as the needs of their family. This is a custom plan developed by a team of professionals for each child and their parents.

It is important to remember that children with ASDs are just as susceptible to childhood illnesses as children without ASDs. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends regular medical and dental check-ups as part of each child's routine care and ASD intervention plans. Quite often children with ASD may show symptoms that will require a physical exam to determine if a symptom is a sign of illness or a symptom of ASD. Head banging, for example, could be a sign a child is having headaches or severe earaches or it could be a symptom of that child's ASD. A thorough physical exam by a board certified pediatrician is needed to diagnose and treat infections or identify a symptom of ASD.

Young children under the age of 3, who are at risk of having developmental delays, may be eligible for early intervention services. These services are provided by Early Intervention Programs provided by each state. Parents may also request full evaluations through their Early Intervention programs if they feel there is a possibility their child may have ASD.

Children who have been diagnosed as having ASD may require a number of services from several different specialists. There is no "one-size-fits-most" course of treatment which addresses the cognitive, emotional, behavioral and medical needs of children with ASD. Each child must be taken on his, or her, own merit and treated accordingly. Many children will benefit from occupational or speech therapies while others may need behavioral modification and

socialization assistance. All children will need education evaluations and consideration.

Currently there is no cure for ASD but early, intensive treatment can help children with the disorder gain skills and strategies that will help them lead fulfilling lives as they progress through their teen year and into fulfilling adult lives.

The main goal of parents, families and the medical and educational staff who provide assistance to individuals with ASD is to assist each individual, on a one-on-one basis, improve his or her quality of life. The aim is to maintain, improve, or introduce new skills that will allow the individual to actively participate in meaningful life activities.

Unfortunately there is no one-guideline-fits-most parenting guideline. Parents must educate themselves regarding their own child's diagnosis and daily needs. By using the collaborative assistance of available professionals such as the family pediatrician, occupational, speech, and behavioral therapists, and mental health and educational professionals, parents will be able to assist their child with autism (ASD) gain the appropriate social and learning skills needed to function in everyday life.



www.autism-society.org