

<http://gbgm-umc.org/disc/autism.stm>

Information on Autism for Religious Education Teachers

By Charlotte Hawkins-Shepard

Autism is a developmental disability. It is developmental because the disability begins early in life (before the age of 30 months) and lasts a lifetime. The disorder significantly affects verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions. A more extensive technical definition can be found in the diagnostic manual used to classify disabilities, the 1994 issue of DSM-IV, but simply put, autism is a condition in which the brain does not work effectively.

The cause of autism is unknown, but currently researchers are investigating areas such as neurological damage and biochemical imbalance in the brain. Autism is not caused by psychological factors, and research has shown autism is not the result of how parents care for the child..

From 10 to 15 out of every 10,000 people have autism, and the disorder is four times more common in boys than in girls. There are more than a half-million persons with autism in the United States today.

Background

In 1943, Dr. Leo Kanner first used the term autism in describing 11 children with this disability. He picked this term because "autos" is the Greek word for "self" and self-aloneness is a main feature of autism.

Kanner separated the term autism from the term mental retardation believing that those with autism had good cognitive potential, based on his observations of the children and on their normal appearance.

Autism was originally thought to be a form of schizophrenia, but in 1980 it was separated from this category of disability, and classified

as a pervasive developmental disability. Pervasive means several areas of development are affected.

Characteristics and Behavior Patterns

Some or all of these characteristics may be observed in persons with mild to severe forms of autism:

- difficulty in relating to people, objects and events. (For example, people in the church may greet a person with autism and receive no response or an inappropriate response.)
- apparent avoidance of eye contact
(Individuals with autism appear to avoid eye contact, but research has shown that they make eye contact but do not understand its importance or potential. One adult with autism once commented, "I know people talk with their eyes, but don't understand how they do it.")
- repetitive body movements or behavior patterns, such as rocking or spinning, hand flapping, bouncing and jumping
- unusual play with toys and other objects
(For example, presented with a toy Noah's ark, the child with autism probably would not play with the sets of animals, but instead find a door or ramp that flips up and down and would play repeatedly with just that part.)
- difficulty in taking the perspective of another person
(For example, a religious education teacher receiving some kind of very bad news, could be crying, but the student with autism might walk into the room and instead of asking what was wrong or indicating concern, simply would announce that he or she wanted juice.)
- failure to seek comfort
(For example, a child with autism could fall down on the stairs coming into the church and receive a painful bump on the head. But the child might not cry, run to an adult or communicate what had happened.)
- difficulty with changes in routine or familiar surroundings. (For example, wanting the same snack each Sunday on the same kind of cup and plate, at the same hour, served by the same person.)

- heightened sensitivity to sound
(For example, on hearing certain organ music or congregational singing, the individual with autism might hit him/herself, cover both ears or scream.)
- over sensitivity to touch
(For example, when patted on the shoulder by a clergy person or other well meaning member of the congregation, a child with autism could become very upset.)
- over sensitivity to light
(For example, on entering the parish hall, a student with autism might turn down the light, or turn it off, especially in the case of florescent lighting.)
- over sensitivity to certain textures of fabrics
(For example, when a religious education teacher gives a flannel board presentation to the class, instead of paying attention to the pictures on the board, the student with autism may become absorbed with how the flannel feels.)
- impaired social skills
(Persons with autism do not acquire social skills incidentally; these skills must be taught.)
- distractibility
(It often is hard to direct the attention of a person with autism. For example, when shown a picture of Jesus and his disciples, a student could focus on an irrelevant aspect of the picture, such as the way light is reflected off the surface of the paper.)
- sequencing problems
(For example, not remembering the order of tasks.)
- inability to generalize or apply what has been learned in one situation to another similar situation
- organizational difficulties
(Individuals with autism often cannot analyze tasks into their separate parts or know how to start a task or how to proceed.)
- difficulty processing spoken language
(See section on teaching students with autism.)
- difficulty with expressive language
- unusual speech characteristics
(Such as reversal of pronouns: Substituting "you" for "I", and

"I" for "you." Or, using echolalic speech. For example, a teacher working in a religious education classroom observes a clergy person entering the room. The teacher says "Say hello to the Pastor." And the student with autism responds "Say hello to the Pastor!")

Teaching Students with Autism

The classroom environment should be structured so that the program is consistent and predictable. Individuals with autism need to have routines. Checklists and visual schedules often work well.

Students with autism benefit from teaching that relies on the concrete. Objects and pictures are better than words only. Demonstrations frequently are useful.

Often it may appear that students with autism are not understanding what has been presented, but teachers need to assume what they are saying has been understood.

People with autism usually need more time to process what they have been presented - about 20 seconds. It is not a good idea simply to repeat a message, as repetition can interfere with this processing.

Individuals with autism learn more easily and are less confused when information is presented visually as well as verbally. It can be helpful to provide visual instructions that show what has been finished, what needs to be done and how the student is to proceed.

One useful teaching strategy is having a calendar, and adding pictures and words, to give students information and show them what will be happening in their lives, such as saying and writing "Next Saturday you will come to the church picnic; next Sunday you are in a pageant in church."

Resources

Breakthroughs: How to Reach Students with Autism. (Book.) (1998). Karen Sewell. (Autism Society's Teacher of the Year.) Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston VA 20191-1589. 1-888-232-7733..

Breakthroughs: How to Reach Students with Autism. (video - 25 min.). (1998). Karen Sewell. (Autism Society's Teacher of the Year.)

Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston VA 20191-1589. 1-888-232-7733.

Fostering Peer Acceptance of Handicapped Students. (1990). ERIC Digest, #E406. Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston VA 20191-1589. 1-888-232-7733.

Right From the Start: Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism: A Guide for Parents and Professionals. (1998). S. L. Harris and M. J. Weiss. Woodbine House, Bethesda MD. 1-800-843-7323.

The Lord's Prayer in motions. A physically expressive way of saying and moving through the Lord's Prayer. AAMR Religion Division, c/o The Rev. Bill Gaventa, the Boggs Center-UAP, Liberty Plaza, 335 George Street, P.O. Box 2688, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08903-2688.

Walking with Jesus. Daily Devotions for People with Special Learning Needs. Bethesda Lutheran Home, 700 Hoffman Drive, Watertown WI 53094. 1-800-369-INFO.

Organizations

Autism Hotline, Autism Services Center, P.O. Box 507, Huntington, WV 25710-0507. 1-304-525-8014.

Autism Society of America, 7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 300, Bethesda, MD 20814-3015. 1-800-3AUTISM. World Wide Web: <http://www.autism-society.org>

National Christian Resource Center, 700 Hoffman Drive, Watertown WI 53094 800-369-INFO.

University Affiliated Program of Indiana, Institute for the Study of Developmental Disabilities, Resource Center for Autism, 2853 East Tenth Street, Bloomington IN 47408-2601. 1-812-855-6508.