

Autism 101

Developing a Basic Understanding
of Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Medical Diagnosis – DSM V

- Changed in May, 2013
- Previously 3 separate diagnoses under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorder
 - Asperger Syndrome
 - Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)
 - Autistic Disorder
- Currently – 1 medical diagnosis
 - Autism Spectrum Disorder

Medical Criteria for Diagnosis

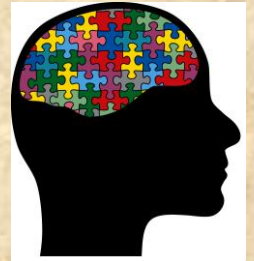
- Medical criteria for diagnosis: (Diagnosis must be made by M.D. or Ph.D. psychologist)
 - Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction
 - Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities
 - Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).
 - Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

Data & Statistics

- Occurs in at least 1 in 88 births (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012)
- ASD is almost 5 times more common among boys (1 in 54) than among girls (1 in 252)
- Fastest growing developmental disability

What Causes ASD?

- Neurological disorder, generally thought to be present from birth.
- Affects the way the brain processes and uses information.
- Researchers have determined that genetic factors, possibly in combination with environmental factors, contribute to causation of ASD.
- Researchers have determined that many individuals with ASD have abnormalities in several regions of the brain including the cerebellum, amygdala and hippocampus.



How is ASD Diagnosed?

- ASD is a clinical / behavioral diagnosis
- No specific medical tests to make a diagnosis of ASD.
- The person making the diagnosis should have extensive experience and knowledge regarding ASD.



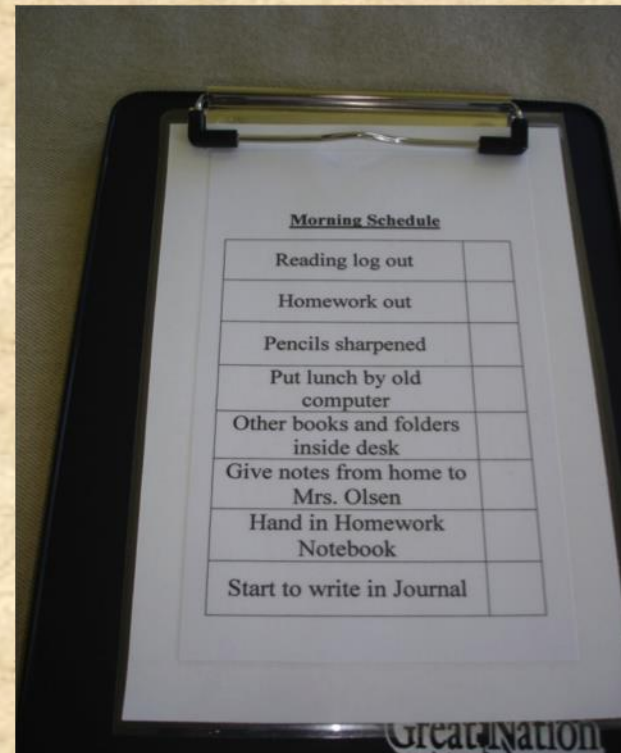
Features & Characteristics of Autism

Spectrum Disorder

- Learning / thinking / processing differences
- Restricted, repetitive, perseverative patterns of behavior, thoughts & interests
- Inflexible thinking
- Sensory processing differences
- Communication differences
- Language comprehension differences
- Social relation differences

Learning, Thinking and Processing Differences

- Strengths in processing information *visually* versus weakness in processing information *auditorilly*



Learning, Thinking and Processing Differences

- Attending differences
- Organizing and sequencing differences
- Concrete, literal thinkers
- Difficulty generalizing old knowledge to new situations
- Good rote memory skills which may far exceed functional life skills

Restrictive / Repetitive Patterns of Behavior

- Can present as all-consuming interests in topics, themes or objects
- Strict adherence to rituals or routines
- Insistence on sameness
- Difficulty with change



Sensory Processing Differences

- Often overly sensitive to touch, noise, light, movement
- “Fight or flight” response is common





- The outward manifestations of sensory problems are often seen in noncompliance and/or rages/meltdown behaviors that are out of proportion to the situation or stimulus.

Communication Differences

- Delayed or lack of speech development
- Limited range of communicative use
- May exhibit echolalia or perseverative speech
- Language comprehension and auditory processing difficulties
- *Social* communication differences



Working with a Client who has Asperger Syndrome

- Interview family to find out client's strengths and weaknesses related to his/her autism
- Use simple, direct language/Make questions short, direct, concise. It may help to write questions down and show them to client
- Deal with one issue at a time
- Make sure all individuals understand to whom a pronoun refers
- Take frequent breaks

Asperger Syndrome

Challenges for Court Personnel

- Inability to quickly process and respond to requests, commands and questions
- Unexpected behaviors: laughing, loud vocal tone, poor eye contact
- Not seeming to care about what others are saying or asking of them
- Make statements that seem tactless or brutally honest
- Difficulty understanding slang terms, sarcasm, figures of speech, jokes

Interview Techniques

- Approach in a quiet, non-threatening manner
- Do not interpret lack of eye contact as disrespect
- Structure questions concretely and literally
- Try to keep your face and body neutral
- Understand that receptive and expressive language are deficit areas for persons with autism
- Consider using pictures and/or writing down thoughts step by step

Resources

- **Asperger Syndrome in the Criminal Justice System**
By Judge Kimberly Taylor (retired), Dr. Gary Mesibov,
and Dennis Debbaudt (2009) Modified and
Reformatted for an AS Population by Nomi
Kai:[http://www.aane.org/asperger_resources/articles/
miscellaneous/as_in_the_criminal_justice_system.ht
ml](http://www.aane.org/asperger_resources/articles/miscellaneous/as_in_the_criminal_justice_system.html)
- **The Geek Defense-Do criminals with Asperger's
syndrome deserve special treatment? By Erica
Westly:**
[http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/sci
ence/2009/10/the_geek_defense.2.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2009/10/the_geek_defense.2.html)

Resources

- Asperger's presents new challenges to court system
By Jo Ciavaglia staff writer:
http://www.phillyburbs.com/news/local/the_intelligencer_news/asperger-s-presents-new-challenges-to-court-system/article_6fb4dd6a-2093-5f7f-a61c-14cc812b7165.html
- Asperger's disorder and the criminal law. [Freckelton I.](#)
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21774264>

Resources

- Autism Society of America: <http://www.autism-society.org/>
- Autism Speaks: <http://www.autismspeaks.org/>