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Published April 15th, 2009

Ask Dr. Harold, Autism Spectrum Disorders

By Dr. Harold Jules Hoyle, Ph.D.

I was recently at a volleyball game at Campo, when a parent I was talking to told me that her nephew was diagnosed with high functioning Autism. She asked me, "What does that mean and what should I do?"

So here is some background and a short rundown on the recent research on children with Autism.

Autism (first described in 1943 by Leo Kanner and in 1944 by Hans Asperger) is characterized by clinically significant behavior involving: 1) Social impairment, 2) Communication impairment, 3) Repetitive behaviors/interests. Clinicians observe a child's behavior in order to diagnose it. Asperger's disorder does not have the language or cognitive delays that can be a part of an Autism diagnosis.

In the past several years, terminology has changed from talking about just Autism and Asperger's disorders to talking about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). More recently, the research community has begun using the term Autisms. This is because there is growing evidence that are different Autisms. Some kids have seizure disorders, some have anxiety, some have gastro-intestinal issues, and many other subtypes. The key point researchers and clinicians agree upon is Autism is not one thing.

As far as what causes Autism, the most controversial theory has been childhood inoculations. Leading researchers in this field, however, have ruled out inoculations as the direct cause for the increased diagnosis of Autism, so I recommend you make decisions about childhood inoculations with your pediatrician and not based on what I write, what you see on TV, or what you find on the Internet. What we do know is that ASDs are developmental disorders of the brain. The interactions between genes, the body's immune system, and the environment are being studied at a remarkable rate and new studies come out each month. One of the leading research centers in the world is just up the road at UC Davis' MIND Institute. They have tremendous resources on their Web site.

So what do you do if your child is diagnosed with an ASD?

Treatment professionals agree on one thing: Early intervention is important. Because there are many Autisms, kids may or may not respond to a particular treatment. A special diet might significantly change the lives of some kids, but not others. Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) might work well for many kids, but not for others. Treatment specialists are now recommending individualizing treatment planning for kids. This is where you reach out to professionals and organizations for support and advice.

I recommend a combination of direct intervention with the child, support services for the child and family, and everyone in the family or who works with the child get educated about how they can help in their role.

The medical professionals who diagnose ASDs should refer the family to the appropriate services for the age of the child. Autism is covered under Special Education Law and an Individual Family Service Plan IFSP for birth to 5 or and Individual Education Program IEP K-12 should be implemented as soon as possible.

Here is a list of resources: 1) CARE Parent Network is a local resource for families of children with Autism and other developmental disabilities, 2) The Orion Academy in Moraga is a nationally recognized, accredited school for children on the spectrum, 3) I recommend books by Temple Grandin, 4) A short novel that many people say helps them understand the thinking of kids with ASD is, *The Curious*

Incident of the Dog in the Night-time by Mark Haddon.

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