Autism Spectrum Disorders: Red Flags

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Who am I?

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What is Autism?

- A spectrum disorder (a group of disorders with similar features)
- Medical diagnosis requires impairment in two main areas:
  1. Social communication
  2. Restricted or repetitive behavior or interests

If you know one person with Autism, you know one person with Autism.
Common Characteristics

May include:

- Reduced or no social engagement/interaction
- Difficulty understanding spoken language
- Failure to develop peer relationships
- Delay or lack of development of speech
- Poor conversation skills
- Stereotyped or repetitive use of language
- Engagement in specific rituals or routines
- Preoccupation with one item or topic
- Stereotyped and repetitive motor movements
More Common Characteristics

May include:

• Sensory and regulatory challenges
• Over or under reaction to sensory input
• Eating and sleeping difficulties
• Challenging behaviors: crying, screaming, dropping, running, tantrums, or self-injurious behaviors
• Reduced or no eye gaze

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Prevalence of Autism

1 in 68 children, according to the CDC

5 times more common in boys
Children may receive a diagnosis of autism from:
- A psychologist
- A psychiatrist
- A developmental pediatrician
- A speech-language pathologist

Often diagnosed by a team of professionals

School eligibility for special education is not the same as a medical diagnosis
Learning the Early Signs

• Research now suggests that children as young as 1 year old can show signs of autism.
• Developmental milestones
• Early intervention
• No big smiles or other warm, joyful expressions by six months or thereafter
• No back-and-forth sharing of sounds, smiles, or other facial expressions by nine months or thereafter
• No babbling by 12 months
• No back-and-forth gestures, such as pointing, showing, reaching, or waving by 12 months
• No words by 16 months
• No two-word meaningful phrases (without imitating or repeating) by 24 months
• Any loss of speech or babbling or social skills at any age
Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers, revised (M-CHAT-R) available at www.AutismSpeaks.org
For more information about recognizing the early signs of developmental and behavioral disorders, please visit http://www.firstsigns.org or the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/actearly.
How to Approach Parents

• Who should speak to families
  – Structure
  – Multiple conversations
  – First teacher
  – Follow-up
  – Family’s culture
Communicating Concerns to Parents

- Lost in translation
- Stigmatized
- Follow-up
How to Approach Parents

• What to say
  – Family’s expectations
  – Concrete, objective examples
  – For example, “Do you have any concerns about Max’s development?” Follow up with specifics: “We’ve noticed that he doesn’t wave bye-bye and we don’t hear him using words.”
  – If you don’t have specifics, ask an open question re: development “Logan is almost 2 years old. What are some of the things you expected him to do at this age?”
• When to say it
  – As soon as your or your staff become concerned
  – Perhaps informally at first, but as concerns increase, call a formal meeting or conference
  – As many times as needed
How to Approach Parents

• Give printed information
  - The CDC provides free milestone checklists and informational flyers re: Autism and other disorders
  - Work with providers in your area to develop a list of places to go for diagnosis
  - Refer parents to local Autism agencies, such as the Autism Society or Autism Alliance of Michigan
Positive Messages for Parents

• Early intervention makes a huge impact
• Autism insurance mandate in Michigan
  – First step: pediatrician
  – Second step: official diagnosis
  – Third step: treatment
Challenges

• Academics
• Behavior
• Sensory
• Communication
• Social/Play skills
How to prevent academic challenges

• Break tasks down into small units.
• Use timed work sessions (use a visual or auditory timer)
• Use appropriate curriculum
• Visually show a ‘start’ and ‘end’ to each task
How to prevent behavioral challenges

Consistency

- Provide a predictable, safe environment
- Offer a consistent daily routine
- Avoid surprises
- Prepare for changes; teach flexibility
- Have clear expectations
- Teach new activities in small steps
- Provide visual schedules

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How to prevent behavioral challenges

- Physical structure
  - Divided areas
  - Clear spaces to store items
  - Clear spaces to play and work
  - Consistent use of the same space for the same activity
How does structure help?

- Predictability
- Understanding of expectations/limitations
- Sensory input – communication of needs
- What do I do now?
Simple visual schedule

snack
read
home
This schedule covers the morning before school… and after school.
Reading

1. Read pages 1-5 in the book *Five Silly Fishermen*.
2. Write 3 new reading words in your reading journal.
Specific activity

This schedule covers a visit to the doctor’s office.
Organization

Pictures on shelves show where to put things away.
Bins are filled with art supplies or recycled items to create with.
Sensory Challenges

- Experience input differently
- Can affect the five senses AND vestibular and proprioceptive
- Information is sensed normally, but can be perceived differently
- Painful, unpleasant, confusing
Sensory Challenges

• **Hypersensitivity**, also known as sensory defensiveness – feel “too much”
• **Hyposensitivity** – feel “not as much”
• **Treatment**: occupational therapy and/or sensory integration therapy.
Sensory Challenges

- Muffle loud sounds (PA, television, radio)
- Put tennis balls on bottoms of chair legs
- Maintain a quiet classroom whenever possible
Strategies for Sensory Challenges

• Avoid strong scents
• Allow avoidance of tags
• Be aware of personal space
• Consider using floor lamps in the classroom
• Limit amount of extraneous visual stimuli in the classroom.
• Make a sensory space (change it up regularly)
Home sensory room
Inexpensive and Easy
Inexpensive and Easy

Sensory Bottles

the Iowa farmer's wife

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• Some children may lose words
• Some may begin speaking later
• Some children with autism may never speak
• All will learn a way to communicate
• Picture exchange systems
• Sign language
• Echolalia
Technological Advances
Conversational Reciprocity

- Appear to have large vocabulary
- Little ability to sustain a conversation
- Monologue instead of give and take
- Body language
- Tone of voice
- Phrases of speech
Cat got your tongue?
English Idioms

This is a shortened form of: **Has the cat got your tongue?**
This idiom is used to compel someone to speak, say something or give a response when they are (unusually) quiet.
It is similar to saying: **Have you nothing to say?**
Understanding Communication Style

- Body language doesn’t match
- Facial expressions don’t match
- Tone of voice doesn’t match
- “Little adults”
- Behavior may become communication
- Awareness of challenges can lead to depression

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Strategies for Communication Challenges

- Give him time to respond
- Avoid excessive questions
- Fewer words = better
- Communication tools available
- Obtain attention; not eye contact
- Limit extraneous conversation
- Avoid sarcasm
It’s raining cats and dogs

= It is raining heavily
= There is a heavy downpour
Social/Play Challenges

• Less interest in people, even as infants
• Attachment can be very different
• Lack of ability to interpret facial expressions and gestures leads to misunderstandings
• Regulating emotions can be difficult
• Need for sameness/order
  – Lining up toys, not pretending
Repetitive behaviors

• Intense interests
  – Content – ceiling fans
  – Intensity – all details about Thomas the train

• Stereotypical movements
Stereotypical behaviors can include hand flapping and toe walking.

Sometimes braces or other interventions can be used to help correct toe walking.
Lining up toys
Strategies for social/play challenges

• Teach social and play skills
• Limit time playing alone
• Structure play time
• Behavioral Therapy
• Speech and Language Therapy
• Occupational Therapy
• Educational programs
• Medication
• Bio-medical treatments, including diet and supplements
• Must look for evidence to support chosen course of treatment
What now?

• To find more information:
  • Autism Speaks
  • EarlyOn
  • Autism Society of America (find your local chapter)

• If you see any signs of Autism, or have any concerns about a child, speak up
Questions?

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