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Autism: social skills deficit and implication for classroom situation

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to highlight the impact of social skills deficit in an autistic child. Paper starts with explaining concept of autism and characteristic symptoms of autism. Autism involves triad of symptoms - social skills deficit, communication skills deficit and repetitive or stereotype behavior. But social skills deficit is root cause of all other deficits. Author tries to explain meaning, parameters and consequences of social skills and social skills deficit. The major portion of the paper is devoted to consequences of social skills deficit in classroom situation. These consequences include - lack of friends, lack of relations, lack of assuming expected role, lack of cognitive development, lack of framing a reference value set for decision making, lack of adaptation/adjustment, lack of belongingness and concern for others and Poor personality make up. These consequences are more than sufficient to make child unfit for class in inclusive setting. Finally paper ends with suggesting counselor, special educator, parents and teacher should team up to work on a strategy for making up social skills deficits for an autistic child.

Keywords: Autism, autistic child, social skills, social skills deficit, classroom

1. Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder probably incurable affecting an individual in appearance, cognitive abilities, social efficacy and self-management. Some popular documents described it as triad of symptoms –lack of social skills, lack of communication skills and repetitive or stereotyped behavior. Consequently a child with characteristics of social withdrawal, unable to express verbally or otherwise and lacks ability to speak smoothly can be termed as an autistic child. These symptoms appear before child reaches three years of age. Levy *et al* (2009) explains autism affects information processing in the brain by altering how nerve cells and their synapses connect and organize; how this occurs is not well understood. Johnson (2007) observes autism is one of the three recognized disorders, (which overlap in terms of origin, symptoms as well as rehabilitation) called triad technically termed as Autism spectrum (ASD's). Autism spectrum includes Autism, Asperger syndrome, which lacks delays in cognitive development and language, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (commonly abbreviated as PDD-NOS), which is diagnosed when the full set of criteria for autism or Asperger syndrome are not met. Autism used to be considered a relatively rare disability, occurring in approximately 1 to 2 per 10,000 individuals, but presently being reported with much higher incidence as 1 in 68. Irrespective of incidence the real cause of worry is its non-remission nature and virtually no medical rehabilitation yet available. The only visible solution to the problem is social and psychological rehabilitation could be taken up by counselor, special educator, parents and teacher of the child. The biggest problem with the child is social skill deficit which need to be attended on priority basis which is subject of discussion for this paper.

2. Social skills deficit

Social skills are abilities facilitating interaction and communication with others. Social rules and relations are created, communicated, and changed with changing times. Social rules of appropriate behavior in respect of context and designation are approved by all the persons of a society. The process of learning such rules is called socialization and skills needed for acquiring these rules are called as social skills sometimes also referred as interpersonal skills.

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Interpersonal skills are the skills a person uses to communicate and interact with others. They include persuasion, active listening, delegation, and leadership. The term interpersonal skills is used often to refer to the measure of a person's ability to operate within a community, an organizations through social communication and interactions. It can be termed as adequacy of social psychology with an individual that involves skills learned through changes in attitude, thinking, and behavior. Some educationists also parallel this to life skills which include abilities that help to facilitate communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, critical thinking, creativity, ability to organize, adaptability, ability to co-operate, ability to think critically and make independent decisions. The most important aspect of social skills is showing appropriate behavior matching to the occasion. It includes both verbal as well as nonverbal behaviors including facial expression, body language and gestures etc. We must have gone through a situation when our inappropriate or odd behavior/mannerism had led to our embarrassment or caused feeling of guilt. Another instance we can quote is when our words or actions have hurt somebody so strongly that we felt remorse. The straight explanation is that we could not assess social expectations of situation and people around us. It means for appropriate social behavior we must be able to read others' desires, feelings, intentions moods etc. Many of theorists termed this lack as 'theory of mind' as described by Premack and Woodruff (1978), which is further explained in terms of lack of appropriate experience and empathy skills. Outwardly we can say one must be able to read the gestures and expressions of others in a socially approved schema. We must be able to understand sarcasm and not take things literally. We must be skill full to appreciate and accommodate the ever -shifting social rules and the reality to remain fit in the society. For individuals with autism, these skills are missing or are functioning at a deficit level. Social difficulties are the primary reason that many adults with autism face difficulty in school, social circles and employment situations. As Youngman, they have limited interest in playing or accompanying age mates as well as pretend play an essential characteristic of child development. As children in school, some will not reciprocate social interaction. Often they have limited gestures, have awkward body language, poor manners and/or say honest or inappropriate statements to others that should have been otherwise kept private. Deficits in social interactions can also impact the ability to initiate, maintain, reciprocate, and terminate conversations with peers or adults, hence resulting in earning names of bore, manner less, stereotype or even idiot. Some may face difficulty to do anything different from their routine; we call it regression or tendency for sameness. As a result they feel difficult to interact with new situation or persons or may need an additional support and time for transitioning to new or unfamiliar experiences. This is particular true why they perform poorly on educational tasks.

3. Implications of social skills deficit for classroom situation

Lack of social skills is not a simple problem, it has

multidimensional consequences. It can result in following disadvantages for an autistic child in a classroom.

4. Friendless child

An autistic child is of withdraw nature not due to introvert nature; rather he lacks the capacity to share feelings and sense of togetherness. Friendship is result of matching of characteristics of two persons in terms of liking, disliking, hobbies, following a value and sharing good and bad times. This matching does not only require explicit union rather, but a silent understanding between the two is also essential. This silent understanding of expectations, intentions, moods, and feelings is nothing but theory of mind which is missing in majority of autistic children. Lack of friends is not an ordinary problem for a child; rather it is root of number of consequential problems. A child without friends will miss - the play activities, leisure time entertainment and recreation, sharing of good and bad moments, solving personal problems and the like. Friends help in acquiring manners, etiquettes, customs and building attitudes, interest and personality in summative form. Friends offer model of both good and bad social behavior which one can copy or refrain from following it. A child without friends misses evaluation of his/her adequacy of social behavior which he sees through reactions of friends. In absence of friends an autistic child builds his/her arbitrary perceptions about socially approved or disapproved behaviors. He becomes prejudiced about persons, organizations, systems and the like. In conclusion we can say autistic child builds his own castles isolated from social world around him/her.

5. Lacks relation building

As we know autistic child lacks warmth of feelings, which leads to failure to build interpersonal relations. Building relation is a prerequisite for initiation and progression of teaching learning process. Teacher needs a reciprocal relation for ensuring transaction of learning contents and to get learning tasks done. In absence of a relation there is a mismatch in the perceptions of the persons involved in same business which results in failure to move together. Building relation requires theory of mind which is probable absent in an autistic child. It is not about lack of intention to make relation rather lack of ability to do so. This lack is attributed to two things namely absence of passive social learning (folk psychology) and active social learning (lack of empathy skills). Relation building initiates with a kind of simulation where one starts as a role playing, but slowly and slowly reaches to real situation where one starts feeling concerned. Empathy between friends means one should be able to be happy and sad as the friend is, i.e. putting the foot in same shoe. This is too difficult for an autistic child hence remains unconcerned about others' emotions, consequently no relation. This lack of relation makes the child isolated and devoid of communication resulting in hindrance to cognitive development.

6. Failure to assume expected role

As the child progress in age society expects a role performance as per sex, age and member of a community. A normal child when a move in society acquires typical

mannerism in accordance of his/her designations. This helps in assuming the responsibilities expected of a role. As an autistic child remains isolated from society remain unaware of this important social aspect, thus resulting in displaying odd mannerism inappropriate to the assumed role. This results in unable to play role of a students, a male/female, a monitor, an NCC cadet and the like. Autistic child can defy authority, or remain indifferent to responsibilities and may unnecessarily object to institution's rules and regulations.

7. Poor cognitive development

All the subjects in the school curriculum are aimed at cognitive development of the child. This is well known fact that learner performs better if s/he is deeply involved in the learning process. For instance if a child is reading a story in lesson of history or language s/he needs to feel it like the character of the story, which requires empathy skills. It has been established that actors and play writers have better empathy skill than common people i.e. why they can perform or writer a role flawlessly. An autistic child lack empathy skills thus are unable to visualize the learning content as intended by the author or teacher. This becomes a hurdle for cognitive development of the child. Cognitive development is basis for all other dimensions of human development, thus a lag become inherent in every aspect of life performances. As empathy skills are acquired as early as the age of four years, it essentially comes from socialization, thus indicating social skills deficit is at the base of cognitive development.

8. Unable to frame a reference value set for making decision

Human beings are thinking animals who keep on making decisions for taking actions. This decision taking is always a choice between possible alternatives. We take decisions on the basis of a reference we call as value set which is graded on the basis of our priority for different values. When we take a decision we embrace a value and ignore the alternative value. For instance we help others for embracing value of curtsy against monitory value. We acquire this value set through inputs from our family, community, society and culture which requires empathy skills at their best. An autistic child lacks this value set due to lack of empathy skills, thus remain indecisive in taking decisions. In classroom situation s/he won't be able to decide between learnable and reject able content, good and bad habits, good and not good friends, true and false arguments and finally between fact and fallacy.

9. Poor adjustment/adaptation

When we move in the society, we need to adjust with condition and people. It is good for us and for others also. Adjustment is a social phenomenon, which we master with social experiences we pass through. We learn to postpone our gratifications in favor of others' achievement; we tolerate injustice for common good, we adjust with available facilities for other's respect sake and so and so on. But autistic children can't do so. Adjustment is so important for building relation and in turn becomes basis for cognitive development. Lack of adjustment is a direct consequence of

social skills deficit, which is integral part of autistic composition.

10. Unable to express belongingness and concern for others

As we know autistic children lack capacity to build relation, consequently concern for others is difficult to come by. Autistic child can behave unexpectedly, can spoil a scene, can misbehave with teacher or classmates, can be angry for no reason and can isolate himself from a party when everybody else is enjoying. This odd behavior many a times even annoys teachers and peers which disturbs rhythm of whole class.

11. Throwing temper tantrum, self-injurious and aggressive behaviors

Autistic child due to lack of concern for others, poor relation builder can exhibit aggression for no obvious reason. In its extreme form they may injure themselves intentionally or otherwise and throwing temper tantrum can be too frequent that child needs to be isolated for some time to some days. There is another class of autistic children who are acting in i.e. they show depression like behavior which is also difficult to manage in a normal classroom. The visible reason for both aggression and with drawl behavior is lack of theory of mind, but this does not explain whole of the story as there are many exceptions to it. This needs to be studied and documented on individual basis. Parents and teachers can document frequency and intensity of these behaviors in relation to situation which trigger it. This can help in better management of the child.

12. Poor personality make up

As explained previously an autistic child misses model for acquiring appropriate learnable personality traits. As far as self-learning is concerned s/he is definitely poor on it, consequently results in poor personality make up. The poor personality make up turns the child even physical odd in appearance thus make unacceptable to teachers and peers.

13. Concluding remarks

As we have learnt social skills deficit puts the child on huge disadvantage in all aspects of development. It becomes difficult for parents and schools to place the child in inclusive setting, thus putting the child at even more disadvantage. Although most specialists believe autism is incurable, but does not mean that rehabilitation is not possible. Counselor, special educator, teacher and parents must team up to compensate for social skills deficit. The least requirement is making the child acceptable in the classroom to make inclusion possible. Once child learns to be social, we can hope to compensate other deficits like communication and smooth speaking. Repetitive and stereotype behavior could be due to lack of vocabulary, which comes mainly by virtue of social interaction. Ultimately we conclude if we desire to include autistic child in a normal classroom we can only hope so by planning a strategy for building social skills.

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