Autism: Putting the Pieces Together (in the Regular Ed. Setting)

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Definitions of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- A condition disturbing perceptions and relationships: a disturbance in psychological development in which use of language, reaction to stimuli, interpretation of the world, and the formation of relationships are not fully established and follow unusual patterns. (Bing)
- A spectrum of neuropsychiatric disorders characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication, and unusual and repetitive behavior. (Webster’s New World Medical Dictionary)
- A condition with onset in early childhood and defined by persistent impairment in reciprocal social communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. (DSM-V)

DSM-V Changes
American Psychiatric Association, 2013

- Autism Spectrum Disorder replaces subtypes (i.e., no longer differentiation between Autistic Disorder and Asperger’s Disorder); Rett’s Disorder not included
- Three domains of impairment become two:
  - 1) social communication deficits (combined)
  - 2) fixated interests and repetitive behaviors
- Increased emphasis on rituals and repetitive behaviors
- Severity level identified (1, 2, or 3)

Implications of Proposed Changes
American Psychiatric Association, 2012

- Field tests using new criteria yielded consistent numbers diagnosed
  - Captured some additional cases of ASD
  - Shifted the diagnosis of some to other diagnoses (e.g., Social Communication Disorder, ADHD)
- Specifically endorsed diagnosing comorbid disorders (e.g., ASD + ADHD, medical condition + ASD)

Implications of Proposed Changes

**Clinical diagnosis vs. eligibility under 504 or special education**

- Eligibility for special education:
  - Disorder?
  - Of such severity that it is disabling? 504
  - Does such disability create a need for specialized instruction? special education
Increased Prevalence: Why?

Increased Prevalence


AUTHOR: CDC's National Center for Health Statistics and the Health Resources and Services Administration

FINDINGS:
- The prevalence of parent-reported ASD among children aged 6-17 years was 2% in 2011-2012 compared to 1.2% in 2007.
- The change in prevalence estimates was greatest for boys and for adolescents aged 14 to 17 years.
- Children who were first diagnosed in or after 2008 were more likely to have milder ASD than those diagnosed in or before 2007.
- Much of the increase in the prevalence estimates from 2007 to 2011-2012 for school-aged children was the result of diagnoses of children with previously unrecognized ASD.

Increased Effect or Detect?

Increased Effect or Detect?

Why Prevalence of ASDs Has Increased

- Workshop on U.S. Data to Evaluate Changes in the Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), Executive Summary: February 2011

In terms of reasons for increased ASD prevalence, the debate has been dichotomized by researchers, advocacy groups, and the media to indicate that increases must be explained either by identification factors or by increased risk among the population. In reality, a more complex understanding is needed. It is clear that some of the increase has been related to intrinsic and extrinsic identification factors. However, although a true increase in ASD symptoms cannot be ruled out, such an increase has been difficult to prove. Panels discussed needing to identify and use methods to better understand the role of potential identification and risk factors in the changing prevalence of ASD.

**Bottom line: some of increase is related to differences in definition, but it doesn't seem that all of it is...although that's been difficult to prove**
Increased Effect or Detect? Why Prevalence of ASDs Has Increased

- Workshop on U.S. Data to Evaluate Changes in the Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), Executive Summary: February 2011
  "There are likely multiple forms of ASDs with multiple causes that are poorly understood. It was noted that sufficient evidence exists that biologic and environmental factors, alone and in interaction, need to be considered as causes. It is not necessary to have confirmation that a portion of the increase in ASD prevalence is due to increased risk in the population to motivate the active pursuit of causes of ASDs. By better understanding what causes ASDs, maybe we can understand the increases in measured prevalence."

**Bottom line:** research must continue to determine whether biologic or environmental factors, or a combination of the two, cause autism

Current Statistics
Centers for Disease Control, 2012

- About 1 in 88 children has been identified with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) according to estimates from CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network.
- ASDs are almost 5 times more common among boys (1 in 54) than among girls (1 in 252).
- ASDs reportedly occur in all ethnicities and socioeconomic groups. Studies in Asia, Europe, and North America have identified individuals with an ASD with an average prevalence of about 1%. A recent study in South Korea reported a prevalence of 2.6%.
- About 1 in 6 children in the U.S. had a developmental disability in 2006-2008, ranging from mild disabilities such as speech and language impairments to serious developmental disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, and autism.

Strategies for the Classroom

Get Organized: Use Physical Structure

**Helps student understand what happens where; creates sense of order and control**

- Define basic areas of classroom, such as student work areas (i.e., desks or tables), teacher's desk, turn-in station, supply/textbook station, etc.
- Minimize visual and auditory distractions
- Outline specific boundaries for those who do not recognize them on their own

Get Organized: Provide a Daily Schedule

**Helps eliminate anxiety due to unpredictability or receptive language difficulties; keeps class engaged and increases students' independence; builds self-monitoring skills**

- Provide a succinct outline of the day's (or week's) activities/expectations
- Provide approximate length of time each activity should take if necessary
- Review schedule at the start of class and reference as needed to maintain on-task behavior

**Pre-teach concepts, or give students a “heads up” about the next day’s focus**
Get Organized: Teach Expectations

**Provides confidence that rules/expectations have been clearly established; refreshes skills of everyone

• Engage students in discussion about rules, including why they’re needed, what happens with and without them
• Directly teach and model appropriate behavior (no assumptions!)
• Provide outlets for odd behaviors, rather than attempting to eliminate them entirely

Get Organized…and Help Student Do So, Too!

**Provides structure to student’s world both in and out of classroom and increases likelihood of success

• Assist student at start/end of class in organizing materials
• Post and remind to write down deadlines (including reminders to work on assignment on the way to the final step)
• Encourage to make a note of materials needed (i.e., textbook)
• Help establish a system of using a planner/calendar

Use Your Senses: Provide Visual Supports

**Helps student understand or retain information; helps eliminate language barriers; provides the student something to reference as needed

• Use written or pictorial instructions (vs. only verbal) whenever possible
• Highlight or otherwise draw attention to important information
• Include visual representations of material to complement information (e.g., pictures next to spelling words)
• Post procedures/routines for solving problems or completing assignments (e.g., PEMDAS, writing formula)
• Provide models of finished products or examples of solved problems
• Post lists and reminders as appropriate

**Visually “structure” information to improve understanding and reduce anxiety by breaking it down into smaller parts

Use Your Senses: Incorporate Movement

**Helps student organize him/herself for learning and improves focus on assignment

• Include opportunities for cooperative group learning and active responding during group activities
• Build in movement breaks and opportunities to talk/use voice, especially prior to independent work time
• Provide extra personal space, and allow students to move about without consequence in his/her space

Be Sensitive: Provide Social Skills Instruction

**Helps student learn to function socially in a natural setting, as research suggests that because of their overall disconnectedness, students with ASD do not “pick up on” social skills like other students

• Determine root of difficulty
  – If skill acquisition deficit (student does not have skill), directly teach appropriate behavior or social skill
  – If performance deficit (cannot do at all or can only perform in structured setting), create opportunities for practice, constructive feedback, and natural reinforcement

Says how to perform task
• If doesn’t do, significant acquisition deficit
Performs skill in structured setting
• If doesn’t do, mild-moderate acquisition deficit
Performs skill in natural setting
• If doesn’t do, performance deficit

Be Sensitive: Provide Social Skills Instruction (How-to)

• Give correction discreetly to prevent embarrassment or inadvertent reinforcement
• Provide explicit feedback: explain why student should do it a certain way and model how (emphasize what to do vs. what not to do)
• Ask student to tell/show you how to do it, and practice until learned
• Finally, monitor student’s using new social skill in natural/class setting, and discreetly provide feedback
Be Sensitive: Provide Instruction in Self-Regulation

**Helps student learn to cope with frustration, as students with ASD often have exaggerated responses to stressors**

- Teach and encourage quiet self-talk to work through assignments and stay on task
- In heat of moment, calmly reassure student that you will work together to solve problem; consider reminding of a previous time in which problem was solved
- In private setting, directly teach calming strategies
  - Taking a brief break, getting a drink of water, etc.
  - Closing eyes and taking a few deep breaths or counting to ten
  - Doing something physical—a short walk, some stretches

Be Sensitive: Recognize Individual Strengths/Preferences

**Helps student dedicate energy to academic endeavor, rather than being consumed by area of weakness**

- Consider goal of assignment and “pick your battles”
- Note that pressures of seemingly simple portions of the assignment may interfere with the student’s ability to complete the academic or “thinking” portion (e.g., having to talk to others, being required to write the answer)
- Provide choice in the order of the tasks completed or in other portions of the assignment if feasible
- Allow students to work independently if group work is a stressor; encourage participation as the year progresses by giving student a defined role in the group that capitalizes upon his/her strengths

Be Sensitive: Recognize Individual Strengths/Preferences (Common Areas of Difficulty)

- Reading/listening:
  - understanding the subtleties of language
  - comprehending information as it is intended
- Writing:
  - organizing ideas from head to paper
  - physically creating letters and words in space allotted
- PE
  - coordinating body movements
  - organizing sensory input

Be Encouraging: Provide Rewards

**Allows students who are and are not intrinsically motivated to have something to work towards**

- Discuss “automatic” rewards, such as positive feedback from teacher/parent/peer, good grades, school privileges, and other PBS built into school environment
- Establish a reinforcement system using extrinsic rewards with the student’s or class’s input

Reinforcement vs. Punishment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present stimulus</th>
<th>Remove stimulus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase behavior</td>
<td>Positive reinforcement (i.e., give student sticker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease behavior</td>
<td>Positive punishment (i.e., give student detention)</td>
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Be Encouraging: Shape Rigidity

**Helps student to learn flexibility and how to cope with unexpected changes**

- Provide advanced notice of change/transitions and reminders of when an incomplete assignment may be addressed again
- Differentiate between noncompliance and being overly rule-bound
  - If a student becomes stuck on rules not being followed, discreetly intervene by reminding him/her that you as the teacher will address the problem and encourage him/her to take a brief break
  - If a student has trouble accepting poor grades or criticism, engage in such conversations privately, and over time, remind him/her that no one is perfect
  - If a relationship has been established with the student, provide him/her perspective (i.e., is this problem as big as ______?)
- As the year progresses, assist the student in recognizing that there’s more than one way to accomplish a particular task… and all ways are OK
Be Long-term Oriented: Consider Impact

**Allows student not to be penalized for his/her weaknesses, but to build upon them (vs. avoid them altogether)

- Accommodate a student to capitalize upon strengths, but try not to eliminate sources of frustration altogether (e.g., by nixing all writing assignments)
- Do not judge effectiveness of an intervention until at least three weeks of consistent implementation