

Extra Feature Story

Autism Diagnosis Rates on the Rise, But Understanding Lags

March 10, 2008

New estimates suggest one in 150 eight-year-olds have some form of autism, adding fuel to the debate over the causes of autism and its effect on home, school and workplace environments.

Jeremy Sicile-Kira is 19 years old and has severe autism. He does not speak. He uses a keyboard called a Lightwriter to express his thoughts, one word at a time. "Being severely autistic means being stuck in a body that doesn't work well with no way to communicate," he wrote.

"Autism is a developmental disorder," explained Wendy Fournier, president of the National Autism Association. "It affects communication, the normal development of the brain in children, social interaction and cognitive function."

Many people with autism are characterized by social behavioral problems and tendencies toward obsessive or repetitive behavior.

The disorder is defined on an "autism spectrum" with a range of severities, said Dr. Chris Johnson, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Texas Health Sciences center in San Antonio.

"On the severe end would be a child that sits in a corner, spins a toy, will not look at all at anybody and has no speech," she said.

"On the other end, someone with what's known as 'Asperger's syndrome' may have very good speech but not very conversational speech. They seem to be very bright but don't have a whole lot of interest in socializing with other people."

Understanding people with autism

Jack is nine years old and has high-functioning autism. Sometimes he stands too close to people when they are talking. He gets overwhelmed by large crowds and may flap his arms when he gets excited. He practices "making friends" because it does not come naturally to him. He is an excellent student who will likely live a very normal life.

Students who know peers with autism should remember that though their behaviors might seem rude or standoffish — not paying attention, insisting on talking about only one subject, not playing with others — it's an involuntary reaction.

Johnson recommends exercising patience and empathy, being mindful of touching those with heightened sensitivities and explaining any actions beforehand — "we're going to the cafeteria now" — to keep the situation familiar and comfortable.

Diagnosing Autism

Autism is tested through observation and analysis, a process of seeing how patients react in different circumstances.

One basic test for autism is known as an examination of "joint attention."

"Think of yourself in a restaurant and the person across from you looks up to see a person they know. Wouldn't you look up too? A child with autism might not look up. They don't really care if you're engaged with them or if you break your gaze," Johnson explained.

An estimated one in 150 eight-year-olds in the U.S. have an autism spectrum disorder, according to surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the U.S., reports the Autism Association of America.

Possible causes

The autism community disagrees about the possible causes for the increase in diagnoses. Some doctors, parents and researchers believe that vaccines given to children, particularly those containing the mercury-based preservative thimerosal, trigger autistic behavior.

"What causes these kids to develop autism? Most develop normally and then something happens after one or two years and they kind of regress," Fournier said. "The only smoking gun we have in the development of the disease is the vaccines."

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the CDC, however, insist that vaccinations containing mercury do not increase the risk of autism in children.

Recent reports from the CDC emphasize that autism is a genetic disease and highly inheritable, and that there is no relationship between thimerosal and autism.

Is there a cure?

The possibility of a "cure" for autism also remains controversial. Julia Berle, whose son Baxter was treated with the help of the Autism Research Institute in San Diego, believes Baxter has "fully recovered," as he no longer qualifies for autism services nor exhibits any symptoms.

But Marguerite Colston of the Autism Society of America said that an actual cure has yet to be found.

"You may be functioning completely well but still have autism," she said. "We say autism is treatable, and kids with autism have great potential, but they're going to need services for their whole life."

-- Compiled by Joe Horton for NewsHour Extra

© 2008 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions