

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

STORY

Autism Diagnosis Rates on the Rise, But Understanding Lags, 03/10/08

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/health/jan-june08/autism_3-10.html

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

Student Worksheet (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

1. What is autism?

2. What is a disability?

3. What is the government's role in helping people with behavioral or physical differences? What is a school's role?

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – **Student Worksheet**

1. What is autism?

ANSWER

"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.

2. What is Asperger's syndrome?

ANSWER

"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."

3. How might a person with autism act?

ANSWER

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.

4. What are some recommended ways to communicate with someone who has autism?

ANSWER

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.

5. How is autism diagnosed?

ANSWER

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.

6. What is the connection between autism and vaccinations?

ANSWER

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.

7. Is there a cure for autism?

ANSWER

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."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

1. Write down your thoughts about autism after reading this article. What new things did you learn? What other questions do you have? Discuss these questions as a class and assign small groups to research each question. Come back as a class and discuss the answers you found.

2. Why might the National Autism Association have a different perspective on the connection between vaccines and autism than the Center for Disease Control or the American Academy of Pediatrics? Does the disagreement concern you? If so, how do you decide who is right?

3. What is a health issue that concerns you and/or your family and/or your friends? How do you get information about that issue? Do you trust Internet resources? Which ones? How do you decide what is good information and what is bad information?

4. Sydney Ray, age 15, recently wrote about having a brother with downs syndrome.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/speakout/health/jan-june08/down_2-26.html

How does it make you feel? Do you think essays like this about people's experience can change the behavior of other people? Why or why not?

Extension Activity

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.