



Understanding 'autistic' behavior – Part 1

The following behaviors are commonly seen in people with autism.

“Repetitive”, “unusual” or “limited”:

- Actions
- Interests
- Activities/ Routines/ Rituals

Examples may include:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Mouthing or chewing on objects or fingers
- Toe walking and rocking
- Hand flapping
- Humming or vocalizing
- Holding or “hoarding” familiar and comforting objects
- “Bolting” or removing oneself from an overwhelming or stressful situation
- Intense need for sameness, rigidity in following “rules,” inflexibility
- Use of “scripted” language (i.e. memorized words or phrases from favorite movies, books, shows, etc. - may also be taught).
- Use of repetitive questions (e.g. “What’s next?”; “Is it time for car?”).
- Emotions expressed through “echolalia” (i.e. repeating another’s words and/or phrases). For example, a highly confused and distressed child repeating “You need to use your words!” loudly to himself.
- Preoccupation with specific topics or areas of interest.

Historically, these behaviors were referred to as “stimming”, “inappropriate”, “problematic”, “negative”, “strange”, etc. Parents and professionals were often encouraged to stop, “manage”, eliminate or try to “extinguish” these “autistic” behaviors.

More recent efforts to understand and address these behaviors have led researchers and practitioners to two essential (yet frequently overlooked) sources of information:

- Child development research and practice, which has closely examined the causes and functions of similar behaviors in young children.
- Adults with autism, who have described the causes and purposes of their behaviors.

This information has helped us understand that these behaviors are not bizarre or strange. They are simply **attempts to cope** with situations that individuals with ASD have *not developed* the communication, interaction and “**self-regulation**” skills to effectively handle (“**self-regulation**” can also be called “self-control” or “self-management”).

What is “**Self-Regulation**”? Simply put, it is a person’s ability to do three essential things:

- *Process or filter “sensory information”* (e.g. everything we see, hear, touch, smell, taste)*
- *Manage and express emotions* (e.g. tiredness, boredom, anxiety, excitement, confusion, etc.)
- *Keep one’s “internal engine” (i.e. “physiological arousal”) running at an ideal level – not too fast (“over-arousal”) /slow “under-arousal”). In other words, maintain a calm and alert state.*

(* For more information on “sensory processing”, please see handout: **“What is Sensory Integration?”**)

A person must be able to do all three of these things *effectively* in order to function well in everyday social environments (e.g. home, park, classroom, playground, grocery store, mall, etc).

For example, in order to participate in a classroom, a child with ASD must effectively do the following:

- “Process sensory information” (e.g. filter out the hum of the projector fan, fluorescent lights, background noise, etc. in the classroom).
- “Manage and express emotions” (e.g. keep themselves calm and focused despite any tiredness, boredom, anxiety, frustration, excitement, etc. they may feel).

If a child is unable to do these things in a classroom environment, they will have a very difficult time paying attention, participating, communicating and interacting. This is why so many children with autism have significant difficulties functioning well in school.

Children who can regulate their “internal engines”, emotions and behaviors effectively are more able to relate to others, form peer relationships, and engage in positive social interactions. It has been well documented that children with ASD have *significant challenges* with self-regulation (NRC, 2000). Therefore, children with autism must work much harder than typically developing children to manage their emotions and behaviors and interact with others in everyday social situations.

How does self-regulation develop? How do children learn to cope with or control their emotions and behaviors so they can effectively communicate, interact, pay attention and function in everyday social situations? Why do children with autism have such difficulty managing their own behavior?

***Please see: “Understanding ‘Autistic’ Behavior – Part 2”**

Additional Resources (for parts 1 & 2)

- Hodgdon, L.A. (1999). Solving behavior problems in autism: Improving communication with visual strategies. Troy, MI: Quirk Roberts Publishing.
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