Understanding Your Neurodiverse Child

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Agenda

- Understanding your neurodiverse child
- Supports for neurodiverse children
Aspire Mission and Philosophy

Program of MGH and MGH for Children

Dedicated to providing children, adolescents and adults with high cognitive autism or a related profile with the knowledge and skills necessary to make social connections and lead fulfilling lives.

- Individuals on the autism spectrum need ongoing growth in the areas of self-awareness, social competency, and stress management
- Programs in Charlestown, Newton, Lexington, Westwood, and over 50 employer sites throughout MA, NH and RI
“If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism.”

--Dr. Stephen Shore
Autism Spectrum Disorder

**Social Communication Challenges**

- (2) deficits in social-emotional reciprocity
- (1) deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships
- (3) deficits in nonverbal social communication

**Restricted/Repetitive Behaviors**

- (4) stereotyped or repetitive motor movements and speech
- (2) insistence on sameness
- (3) over- or under-sensitivity to sensory input
- (1) highly restricted interests

**Deficits**

- (1) highly restricted interests
- (2) deficits in social-emotional reciprocity
- (3) deficits in nonverbal social communication
- (4) stereotyped or repetitive motor movements and speech
- (2) insistence on sameness
- (3) over- or under-sensitivity to sensory input
- (1) deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships
Perspective Taking
Perspective Taking

- **Perspective taking**: awareness that other individuals have perspectives different from one’s own given their race, gender, ethnicity, histories, knowledge, desires, intentions, etc.

- Perspective taking allows us to perceive the minds of others
Contextual Awareness
Contextual Awareness

- **Contextual awareness**: awareness that the shared social situation impacts norms that guide our behavior

- Contextual awareness allows us to behave socially in a wide variety of situations
Sensory/Perceptual Differences
Sensory/Perceptual Differences

• ASD symptoms: under or over sensitivity to sensory input
• Senses:
  o Vision
  o Smell
  o Taste
  o Hearing
  o Touch
  o Balance
  o Body awareness
Autism Spectrum Disorders

Comorbid psychiatric conditions:

- Major Depression: 70-77% (Lugnegård et al. 2011; Joshi et al. 2013)
- ADHD: 68% (Joshi et al. 2013)
- Anxiety Disorders: 53-59% (Joshi et al. 2013; Buck et al. 2014)
  - Most common anxiety disorders (Joshi et al. 2013):
    - Social phobia (59%)
    - Agoraphobia (35%)
    - Generalized anxiety disorder (34%)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder: 53% (Joshi et al. 2013)
- Bipolar I: 25% (Joshi et al. 2013)
Autism as a Disability

• Disability is defined as a person with:
  1) a physical or mental impairment that **substantially limits** one or more major life activities;
  2) a history or record of such an impairment;
  3) or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

• Autism spectrum disorders, ADHD and dyslexia are generally recognized as “hidden” disabilities.
Autism and Neurodiversity

Challenges as Strengths
Academic Neurodiversity

maximizing strengths

autism spectrum

subcultures

minimizing challenges

niche environments

aspergers

perspectives

dyslexia
talent

ADHD

productivity
Academic Challenges Maximized

Social Communication Challenges

1. Difficulty finding a tribe
2. Difficulty with group work
3. Difficulty interpreting peer interactions
4. Difficulty controlling "autistic" behaviors

Restricted/Repetitive Behaviors

1. Difficulty with small talk on trivial topics
2. Difficulty with change and transitions
3. Difficulty managing overstimulation in school
4. Difficulty controlling "autistic" behaviors

(1) Difficulty finding a tribe
(2) Difficulty with group work
(3) Difficulty interpreting peer interactions
(4) Difficulty controlling "autistic" behaviors
Academic Strengths Maximized

(1) Strong sense of loyalty to a tribe

(2) Reciprocal conversation with friends on topics of shared interest

Social Communication Challenges

(1) Capacity to develop content expertise

(2) Potential for logical insights on assignments

(3) Heightened perceptual abilities

(4) Strength with repetition

(3) Honest and direct communication style
When you can: preview, preview, preview!

- Give a visual overview of upcoming activities and agenda.
- Allow time for questions about what is expected and components that might be indeterminate (e.g., weather).
- Be as specific as possible, but also accurate. If a plan may change or look differently, note that.
- Teach flexibility to expect the unexpected, at times.
Supports for Neurodiverse Children

**Support curiosity about the social world**

- Review the social behaviors of others in a situation and possible “rules” (e.g., expected/unexpected behaviors, norms, workplace culture).

- Encourage curiosity and questions about what people typically do in a shared situation (e.g., restaurant).

- For example, “What do you notice others doing when we are on the T?” or “I notice many people reading, looking at their phones or listening with earbuds on the train.”
Engage the unique interests of your child

• Tapping into these areas can increase participation and enthusiasm, facilitate social connections, and be sources of insight with your children.

• Elicit connections with additional areas of interest and skill acquisition (e.g., Why would I want to do a volunteer job when I’m not getting paid?).

• Increase self awareness about a strength with being able to delve deep into a subject area.
Be mindful of sensory stimuli

• Difficulty with loud noises, bright lights, intense smells, and other sensory issues can be common for neurodiverse children.

• Do sensory check-ins: For example, what is your preference—lights on or off?

• If possible, try to simplify sensory stimuli during an activity and collaboratively brainstorm strategies to help the child manage sensory concerns.
Transitions can be challenging

• Allow for a few minutes to transition from one activity to the next.

• Give a reminder and verbal supports: “We have five more minutes of this activity before we transition to ________.”

• Express empathy “It can be hard to stop this activity you love doing.”
Supports for Neurodiverse Children

Break down explanations and activities

• Break these down into manageable segments
• Be as specific and concrete as possible
• Ask specific questions to help assess for understanding and follow up with clarifying information.
Visual supports are a must

- Create a supplemental support of a visual aid to assist in explaining a concept or activity.
Supports for Neurodiverse Children

Be specific and concrete

• When exploring an abstract idea, apply concrete examples or a specific insight to best explain the concept.
Be mindful of a need for movement

• Consider structuring periods of movement into an activity to help keep your child engaged and grounded.

• Normalize the need for some children to utilize movement for self-regulation.
Supports for Neurodiverse Children

Incorporate breaks

- Short breaks can alleviate stress or anxiety and improve attention.
- This can be integrated into a schedule and beneficial for the neurotypical and neurodiverse children.
- Designated time for transitions can help children shift between activities.
Aspire employer collaborators
Aspire Programs and Services

- Ages 4 through 45
- Consultation and trainings for workplaces and school systems
- Academic year groups (i.e., fall and spring)
- Summer programs for children, teenagers and adults
- Parent coaching
- Career coaching
- Special events

Visit: https://www.massgeneral.org/aspire/
Suggested Reading List


Questions?

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