Understanding Autism—for Parents and Carers

Sunday 2 April 2017 is World Autism Awareness Day. This presents a significant time for us to pause and reflect on what we know about Autism, gain new information and promote the concept of embracing differences.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (‘Autism’)

The Early Signs

Autism is a complex, life-long developmental disability which is neurobiological in origin. An estimated 1 in 160 to 1 in 100 people have Autism.

The signs of Autism may be evident by age 2 or may only become apparent when the child starts school. One of the first signs, which can alert a parent to the fact that their child is not developing in a typical way, is the manner in which the young child responds to them. They may not learn to speak or have very limited speech. The child may also have great difficulty in understanding the speech of others.

Some children with Autism can develop good spoken language. However, their language is very concrete and literal; it lacks a social quality and is not used in a conversational manner. Parents may notice that their young toddler does not seem interested in playing with other children.

They may also notice that the child is not playing with toys in an imaginative way. Instead, they may spend time placing their toys in neat lines; or engaging in the same sequence of play activity over and over again. While these are some common signs, Autism presents differently for each child.

Common Features of Autism

Social Communication and Interaction

The child may:

- Use few or no words, repeat patterns of words or may have well developed speech, but only talk about a limited range of interests
- Not respond to their name or simple instructions
- Not copy other’s actions
- Have very limited attention span, except for activities that include their interests e.g. trains
- Not engage with peers
- Not engage in pretend play
- Make limited eye contact
Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours and Sensory Processing Differences

The child may:

- Use repetitive speech
- Insist on routines staying the same
- Have a narrow range of interests
- Repeat an action over and over
- Get ‘stuck’ on an activity so that it is difficult to move them on
- Line up or stack objects and may become upset if the order changes
- Be over sensitive or under sensitive to touch, sounds, sights, tastes, textures, movement, smells.

This list does not constitute a diagnosis of Autism. Many young children may show some of these signs at different ages. However, if the child’s development is affected in ways that concern you, it may indicate the need to consult a paediatrician

Strengths of Autism

Children with Autism enjoy routines and predictability. They pay great attention to detail. Although social situations are difficult, children with Autism form strong bonds with people who they have formed a positive relationship with. Children with Autism have—like all other children—many strengths; but also areas where help for further development is needed.

Positive Outcomes

Children do not grow out of Autism. However, with appropriate intervention they can be helped to gain many of the skills we take for granted—skills such as learning to play, communicating and responding to others in a social way.

Children with Autism benefit enormously from programs which provide them with a means to communicate and to develop the skills they need to participate in everyday life. With appropriate education, and the support of dedicated people, the child with Autism can go on to lead a fulfilling life, engaging in social activities and vocational pursuits in later life.

Outlined below are some ideas that parents can take part in during Autism Week to EMBRACE DIFFERENCE!

Talk about differences—how we all have areas of strength and areas where we are not so strong. This might be an opportune time to talk to your child about their great skills; and where they might need to be helped along. You might like to talk about Autism—how children with Autism often love learning, but sometimes need help to make friends; how children with Autism are sometimes very good with numbers but may need more help writing stories etc.
Lots to learn and to do!


Attend a free workshop—Explaining Autism, to be presented by the Autism Association at the State Library of Western Australia, at the Perth Cultural Centre, 25 Francis Street, Perth. Join us on Thursday 30th March from 9.30-11.30am.

Join in—There will be many opportunities to learn while having fun throughout Autism Awareness Week 2017. See: www.autism.org.au

Give us a call if you would like further information; phone (08) 9489 8900

Or email: autismwa@autism.org.au