



Horizons Newsletter

Fall 2014

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*Autism Society
of
Michigan*



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Why Do Kids With Autism Do That?

Author, Lynn Vigo, MSW, LICSW

When my kids were young, my son Justin was quite curious about the many odd mannerisms his sister with autism demonstrated. We welcomed his questions as well as those from his curious neighborhood friends who we were determined to include in our friendly and oh-so-unconventional home. I did my parental best to offer up ideas as to why she does what she does, and thankfully they didn't question me or ask to see the evidence behind my hypotheses. We asked a panel of providers to give us their best answers as to why our kids do what they do. Shelley O'Donnell is an Occupational Therapist specializing in children with autism at Seattle Therapy Services. Jim Mancini is a Speech Language Pathologist and Emily Rastall is a Clinical Psychologist, both at Seattle Children's Autism Center.

Here's what they had to say:

Why do many kids with autism...Avoid eye contact

Jim: Different reasons, I think. There is a difference between kids who actively avoid eye contact and kids who haven't learned how to use eye contact during communication. For active avoiders, I think there is a sensory component where it is unpleasant for them to make direct eye to eye contact.

Emily: One of the core deficits for individuals with autism is difficulty coordinating verbal and non-verbal means of communication. For example, while speaking to someone, a child may forget to make eye contact (which makes it difficult to know to whom the verbalization is directed). In addition, individuals with autism do not find communicative meaning in others' eyes like the rest of us. Thus, they are not drawn to others' eyes as information sources.

Shelley: Because of difficulty attaching meaning to the facial cues of caregivers and peers which relates to the child's social-communication skills.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Cover their eyes/face /ears with their hands

Shelley: This could relate to many things, such as the child covering their face as a way to block out too much sensory stimuli, to self-regulate, or to express feeling scared/anxious. Many children with autism have auditory sensitivities to specific sounds, such as a fire engine, baby crying, or toilet flushing. Covering their ears is one way to lessen the auditory input.

Emily: Children with autism are often hyper-sensitive to auditory stimuli. Thus, sounds that are tolerable to us may be very loud and uncomfortable for them.

Jim: Covering ears can often become a learned behavior and may be linked to anxiety as a child becomes fearful of potential unpleasant noises.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Startle easily

Shelley: The child may have difficulty anticipating everyday events, and filtering irrelevant social and environmental stimuli. When children startle easily, the result is frequently a “fight or flight” response.

Emily: It may be sensitivity to their environments. A sound that we could tolerate may be startling to someone who is more sensitive to auditory input than others.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Echo/repeat words/phrases

Emily: One of the primary communication deficits in autism is the tendency to echo or repeat words or phrases that are heard in one’s environment. Because the brain’s “language center” has difficulty coming up with language on its own, it copies what it hears from the world around it and uses it in place of original words and sentences of its own. It’s sort of like a Rolodex of phrases that the person pulls from at any given time in the day.

Jim: Repeating words, or echolalia, is a common learning style for children with autism. Children with autism often learn language in chunks rather than creatively word by word. In addition, repeating words and phrases often serves a communicative purpose such as saying “yes” or helping with processing of information.

Shelley: Echolalia may relate to the child with autism having difficulty using more complex and spontaneous language. Echolalia can be a developmental phase and working alongside a SLP is very helpful to identify intervention strategies. As children develop more language, they may repeat phrases (e.g., from a movie) as a social initiation, or may learn to ask the same questions during conversation which helps make the interaction more predictable.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Not talk at all

Jim: Talking or expressive language development requires understanding and use of symbols. Words, after all, are simply symbols for things, actions, and concepts. Sometimes children with autism lack or have significant delays in that ability. Children with difficulty with symbolic representation often have difficulty with understanding of language and use of other communication systems (e.g. sign language, Picture Exchange Communication System). Sometimes, children demonstrate the ability to understand language but have difficulty putting sounds together to form words. This can be a result of a motor speech disorder such as apraxia of speech.

Shelley: It’s difficult to know why some children with autism do not talk or express themselves verbally. If possible, accessing alternative methods of communication, such as using gestures, pictures, typing, or a voice-output device is an important part of their social development.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Walk on their toes

Shelley: Toe-walking? This is a good question. Toe-walking may be a learned habit (many toddlers walk on their toes), or may relate to motor coordination challenges, a tight Achilles tendon, or a sensory processing difference. Toe-walking is also seen with other neurological or developmental disorders, such as cerebral palsy.

Emily: Children with autism often present with stereotyped motor movements, one of which may be walking on their tip-toes. Others hypothesize that walking on toes reduces overstimulation in the feet that can occur as a result of walking on the entire foot.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Flap their hands

Shelley: Children with autism tend to have repetitive motor behaviors such as waving or flapping their hands. This arm and hand motion may be accompanied with other motor mannerisms, such as jumping or head turning.

Jim: Repetitive motor mannerisms, such as flapping hands (but also tensing parts of their body, jumping or “dancing”) are often linked to strong emotions (such as excitement or frustration). We see similar behavior in babies who eventually “grow out” of the behavior.

Emily: These may also be self-soothing behaviors and/or attempts at regulating when what is perceived as overwhelming upset/excitement/boredom/anxiety is present.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Like to spin and jump

Shelley: Spinning and jumping are also examples of repetitive motor behaviors. When a child is spinning or jumping he/she is activating the vestibular system. The child may seek vestibular stimulation as a means to elicit “feel good” sensations and/or also to positively affect his/her arousal.

Emily: Yes, in other words, many children with autism seek sensory information or experiences from the environment (due to feeling under-stimulated). They may also use spinning and jumping as a way of regulating themselves (i.e.: when they are stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed). Spinning and jumping can help one feel regulated and “grounded.”

Why do many kids with autism . . . Have difficulty sitting still

Shelley: The child may have sensory-motor challenges, or may have difficulty with attending behaviors.

Emily: It is not uncommon for individuals with autism to present with hyperactivity and “fidgety” behavior. This is related to an executive functioning deficit that leads to difficulty regulating and planning behaviors and resisting impulses.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Fixate on certain things (such as little things – tiny photo on a big page of a book or wheel of a big toy car)

Shelley: When we think about it developmentally, children look at objects that are visually pleasing – such as rotating objects (fans, wheels, pinwheels). Fixating on certain things could also relate to visual processing, such as seeing the components of objects rather than the “whole” object, or perhaps the child has difficulty expanding play with toys and engages in repetitive play.

Emily: Individuals with autism tend to have brains that think about things over and over. They may fixate on things that they find enjoyable or may get “stuck” trying to finish a task or game. A brain affected by autism tends to be more rigid and “black and white”. So it is hard to be flexible with a number of interests and ways of thinking about things.

Why do many kids with autism . . . Not seem to need much sleep

Shelley: I wish I knew (and so do a lot of parents)!

Jim and Emily didn’t hazard a guess on the sleep issue.

Lynn (whose child has been up since 3:30 this morning): Rats! This is the one question I most wanted an answer to!

Why do many kids with autism . . . Stare into space

Shelley: Some children don’t realize they are staring – but may be “tuning out” what is overwhelming them or daydreaming about preferred interests. If the behavior is concerning, parents should consult with their pediatrician.

Emily: Individuals with autism are often very detail-oriented. Thus, they may notice details in the environment that we do not, and may get fixated on those details (thus, blocking all else out of their attention span and appearing to be “spaced out”).

Why do many kids with autism . . . Have trouble with transitions

Emily: This relates to the way a brain affected by autism works – being less flexible than other brains. When it is fixated on something that it finds enjoyable, it has a hard time “flexing” to allow for new tasks or information to come in. It needs time and many reminders to switch to a new topic.

We’d like to thank our providers for taking a stab at answering some of the more perplexing questions about why kids with autism do some of the things they do. This may help those of us who love someone with autism to describe and explain our kids’ behavior and allow others to understand them better.



Website Review: Autism Awesomeness

awesomenessandautism.blogspot.com

Anne Carpenter

This web site, by Erin Stevenson-Bennett, is a relatively new blog for teachers to help them work with students who are more *severely* affected by autism and who also often have the label of Cognitive Impairment. She is a teacher in North Carolina who has worked with her “kiddos” for several years now. Her students are middle and high school ages who need a great deal of support and hands-on learning to be successful so she presents tools and resources on her blog to help teachers work with students who need this kind of extra support. One tool that she is absolutely fanatical about is the Work Box—a container that has small items such as miniature bowling game sets, erasers, and small toys for teaching kids with ASD to sort, to identify objects by color, to sequence objects, and to organize them so that they can have these skills for life. The website shows different kinds of work boxes and how they can be set up including the different kinds of containers that can be used.

In addition, there are examples of visual schedules that teachers can use to help keep the students focused and “on task.” The blog entries are arranged by date with a clickable link to archived blogs that go back to 2012. As a bonus, the website is just plain *gorgeous!* There is a motif of colorful, overlapping bubbles that tickles the eyes and puts a smile on one’s face. The author writes her blogs in a straightforward, warmhearted style and the reader can just tell that she loves her students and really enjoys working with them, a true sign of a dedicated teacher! The suggestions are practical and the materials can be bought at any Dollar Tree or Meijer store in town. This makes the website a more realistic and practical resource for special-ed. teachers, who must face an era of budget cuts. This website was an enjoyable and fun read and was a great mixture of narrative and practical ideas along with numerous color photos and illustrations. This would be a great website for teachers to look over during August to get ready for the brand new school year ahead!



Bowling Game “Work Box”



“Bubbles”

Improving Your Kids' Executive Functioning Skills

Often referred to as the “orchestra conductor” of our brain, the Executive Functioning (EF) system is what allows us to successfully do things such as: problem-solve, organize, sequence, initiate, attend, plan, shift between tasks and thoughts, and control our emotions and impulses. It is also responsible for enabling us to delay gratification, learn from mistakes, and persist in the face of challenges. The EF system coordinates input from multiple various regions of the brain and organizes our behavioral responses.

Children with poor EF skills tend to be more disorganized, take a long time to complete routine tasks, struggle with projects, homework assignments, and study skills. These difficulties not only affect children's grades, but also take a toll on their confidence and emotional well-being.

EF skills are not just genetically predetermined, but can also be developed and strengthened well into early adulthood. The brain can be retrained just as our muscles can be strengthened and shaped through exercise. Here are some tips for strengthening your child's EF skills:

- Use blocks or Play-Doh to create structures for your child to replicate. Repeatedly generate novel designs that are not tied to pre-set rules and patterns. This exercise works on initiation, breaking down steps, sequencing, organizing, and attending.
- Board games provide many ways of enhancing EF skills. Players must use strategy, planning, flexibility, attend, follow directions, and cope with consequences when things don't go their way. A few board games that particularly target EF skills include: Rush hour, Mastermind, Connect 4 Stackers, Monopoly, Clue, Chess, puzzles, and Chinese checkers.
- Having children participate in cooking or baking activities is a simple, yet fun and effective way to foster EF skills, including planning, organizing, sequencing steps, shifting between multiple tasks, and delaying gratification. Once you have a recipe that you know your child can make, have him or her create the list of groceries and cooking supplies needed. Older kids can even look up prices and develop an estimated budget.
- Physical exercise is another great means of enhancing EF skills. You can focus on developing novel routines for kids that challenge planning, coordination, and sequencing in new and different ways. Yoga is also a wonderful means of improving attention, regulating behavior, sequencing movements, and remaining calm through challenges.

The summer/fall months may allow for an opportunity to look around at everyday tasks and opportunities to foster these important skills in your children. Not only will they enjoy the activities, but they will also benefit from the time you spend engaged in these shared experiences with them, enhancing the overall quality of your relationship.

Reprinted from: www.workingwithautism.com

Easy Pumpkin Cookies

INGREDIENTS:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 (14 ounce) can 100% pure pumpkin | 1 (18.25 ounce) package spice cake mix |
| 2 eggs | 1 teaspoon cinnamon |
| 1/2 cup applesauce | 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg |
| 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract | 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves |

DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C). Lightly grease two baking sheets.
2. Beat the pumpkin, eggs, applesauce, and vanilla together in a large mixing bowl. Stir in the cake mix, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves until well blended and creamy. Drop by spoonful on prepared baking sheets.
3. Bake in preheated oven until tops are firm when lightly touched, 8 to 10 minutes. Cool on racks.

Anne's Book Review

TITLE: The Autism Spectrum, Sexuality and the Law: What Every Parent and Professional Needs to Know

AUTHORS: Attwood, Tony; Henault, Isabelle and Dubin, Nick

SUBJECT AREA: Autism Spectrum Disorders-Sexuality-Legal Issues

PUBLISHER: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

PUBLICATION DATE: 2014

NUMBER OF PAGES: 224

When one thinks of a person with ASD as a sexual being, one often draws a blank. Images of a happy couple holding hands in the moonlight or kissing under the mistletoe at Christmastime do not come to mind. Instead, instances of abuse lack of knowledge about sexuality and all of its complexities come to mind. With this said, the authors have collaborated with Nick Dubin, a young man on the autism spectrum, who has been well-known in Michigan for his speaking engagements and videos that he did several years ago, to tell his story about the worst years of his life. On Oct. 6th of 2010, FBI agents barged into his apartment, conducting a massive raid and what they found was shocking beyond belief; he had a stash of child pornography. When I heard about this I was surprised because he didn't strike as the kind of person who would do such a thing.

Dubin describes his life from the time he was a child, all the way to the present and one can see a picture of a kind, decent young man with a great deal of anxiety, depression and many social difficulties. For years, he struggled with his sexual identity and because he lacked experience with dating and relationships, he fought to understand sexuality in all of its glory and complexity. As a result and because of his prolonged social isolation, he turned to the Internet for information on sexuality on the advice of a therapist with expertise in sexuality. Unfortunately, he stumbled onto child pornography sites and was hooked To Dubin this was a way to transport himself back to a more innocent time when he was a child and relatively free of the myriad of problems he now faced as an adult. With his difficulties with the Theory of Mind and not picking up on subtle social cues, Dubin did not realize that the children on these sites were victims. They had been exploited in every possible way. Not realizing this, he downloaded the images out of innocent curiosity and a longing to go back in time. What ensued was the most heartbreaking and upsetting story I have read in years. As the story unfolded, I knew what he did was wrong, yet I flinched at the harsh treatment by FBI agents, prosecutors and attorneys who had little to no understanding of how ASD can influence one's behavior and result in an underdeveloped sexuality.

With heart-rending detail, Dubin tells this awful saga and pulls no punches about how society can and *does* treat a sex offender. I was impressed with Dubin's courage and willingness to tell his story in the face of seemingly impossible odds with so many awful twists and turns. What impressed me the most was that the book included chapters by Dubin's mother and father giving their side of the story. His mother described how this ordeal affected the whole family and how things fell apart so badly and his father, who is an attorney and taught law, gave the legal side of the story. Then, Isabelle Henault, a psychologist with a degree in Sexology from Quebec, contributed several chapters covering factors in sexual development in people with ASD and how such factors as segregated environments and treating people with ASD as asexual beings can adversely affect their sexuality. She also highlights ways parents can foster a healthy sexuality in a man or woman with ASD so that one won't need to turn to pornography on the Internet or resort to inappropriate sexual behavior. This book is a wake-up call, folks. We must start seeing people with ASD for the sexual beings they are, just like everyone else. This book is a call for more timely education about sexuality for people on the autism spectrum. This is a disturbing and upsetting read, but a necessary one. This is what can and does happen, unless a person with ASD is educated about sexuality in a timely, respectful and compassionate manner.



Wearing Winter Clothes

by: Rachel Durkan



Winter is a time of change and stress for our children. The days are shorter and the weather gets colder. Changing from fall to winter clothes brings many challenges for our children. With all the layers and extra clothing (gloves, scarves, hats, boots, etc.), dressing for winter can be a stressful and complicated process.

It is very important to note that everyone, to some extent, experiences the challenges our children face with winter clothes. Who has not found the beautiful wool sweater from our favorite aunt too itchy to wear? Who has not found the extremes of going from feeling very cold to hot and sweaty disconcerting? Who has not felt “weighed down” by the bulk and weight of winter clothes? The significant difference is that we are able to identify and express what makes us feel uncomfortable, make changes to increase our comfort, and understand that the unpleasant feelings we are experiencing are only temporary. However, once we gain an understanding of the sensory and communication challenges that our children experience, we can employ strategies to lessen the stressors they experience with winter clothes.

Use Social Stories: Social stories can help with the transition from fall to winter clothes and prove useful throughout the winter. For example, making a slide show or photograph albums of the child and her significant others wearing winter clothes.

Provide Visual Supports: Using communication devices, photographs/picture symbols, signs will enable your child to identify and express their discomfort (e.g., hurts, itchy, don't like).

Use an Activity Schedule: Use an activity schedule to help your child sequence the steps necessary for putting on winter garments and anticipate the end of the activity. Also, encourage your child to be an active participant in the activity.

Look for Winter Garments with Smooth Fabrics and Minimal Bulks: Long sleeve hiking tops are ideal for fluctuations in temperature. They are constructed to keep you warm with minimum bulk, have wicking qualities that absorb sweat, and the texture of the fabric is smooth. In addition, these shirts are thin enough for a child to wear a preferred T-shirt over it! Winter coats made from a Thinsulate fabric are warm, reflect rain or snow, and are lightweight.

Prepare Clothes the Night Before: Encourage your child to choose and lay out their clothing the night before. This eliminates one step in the morning when we are typically in a rush. Additionally, giving our children a choice in the selection of what to wear encourages choice making, empowers them, provides insight into their preferences (texture, color, etc.), and may lead to more positive behaviors related to dressing.

Provide Ample Time to Get Dressed: Provide ample time in the morning for your child to dress themselves. In addition, create a calm and unhurried atmosphere. The additional steps needed to get out during the winter months are difficult for everyone and our children pick up on our stress.

Remove Tags: If you notice your child touching the back of his neck, consider removing the tags in his clothing. What may seem like an insignificant irritant to you could be perceived as very distressful for our children.

Use Adaptions: A slight adaptation can make a huge difference. For example, the use of a zipper pull could enable your child to manipulate his zipper. Additionally, clothes that are on the loose side are easier to put on and take off and are generally more comfortable. Consider using gloves instead of mittens. While gloves may be challenging to put on, they will provide your child with more dexterity for functional and leisure activities.

KEEP YOUR WINTER CLOTHES ON!

Social Story

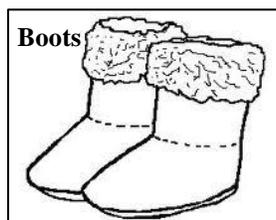
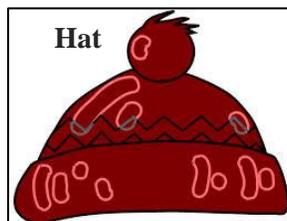
Whenever I leave my house in the cold weather, I wear my coat, hat, gloves, scarf & boots.

I wear my coat, hat, gloves, scarf & boots to school.

I wear my coat, hat, gloves, scarf & boots when I am outside.

My coat, hat, gloves, scarf & boots keep me cozy and warm.

When I get home, I can take my coat, hat, gloves, scarf & boots off again!



Pictures to go with the story.

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The mission of the Autism Society of Michigan (ASM) is to assure full participation and self-determination in every aspect of life for each individual. We will realize this vision by opening avenues of self-advocacy and advocating on behalf of others in a way that values equity, respect, dignity and diversity in all communities.

Your “Horizons” Has Arrived!

At a Glance in This Issue....

- Answering Why Children with Autism “Do That”?
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