

Three Minute Article for Parents

Autism spectrum disorder: Need for increased awareness among parents

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Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental illness, which affects about 1 in 100 children worldwide. It is characterized by problems with communication, social interactions, the presence of restricted interests and repetitive behaviours.

Features of autism spectrum disorders can be identified in children as young as 12 months of age. Early identification of this disorder enables treatment to be started early. Starting treatment as early as possible is absolutely essential, as it has been shown to improve speech, social interactions, daily skills and intelligence, in these children.

The impairments in social interactions in children with autism include, but are not limited to, not responding to name, lack of pointing to objects, lack of social gestures such as waving “bye-bye”, by the age of one year; avoidance of eye contact and lack of facial expressions, lack of interest in playing with others and preferring to play by self, not sharing their interests and enjoyment with others, absence of pretend play (e.g. pretending to feed a doll) by 18 months and lack of imaginative play (i.e. using their imagination to assign roles to inanimate objects or people while playing) by the age of three years.

Some of the speech abnormalities found in autism include absence of single words by one year, inability to speak in simple phrases combining two words by the age of two years and loss of previously acquired speech at any age.

Repeated movements such as hand flapping, rocking, spinning, repeating the same word or phrase again and again, preference for sameness (e.g. plays with the same toys the same way every day, lines up toys in a row, prefers to wear the same clothes or to eat the same food) and getting upset over minor changes in routine, are some of the restrictive repetitive interests and behaviour seen in autism.

Although early diagnosis and treatment is of utmost importance in this condition, we found that about 50% of children suspected to have autism present to services only after 3 years of age¹. In addition, we found that most children present with speech

delay and that less than 5 per cent of children are brought due to problems with social interactions and restricted/ repetitive interests and behaviour¹. This suggests that all these abnormalities in social interactions and restricted interests and behaviours are often unrecognized by parents. We also found that children who have delay in speech, present for treatment earlier than children without speech delay¹.

Therefore, in view of all these important details, parents’ being aware of the early signs and symptoms of autism is important to make sure that children have the opportunity to receive early and timely treatment to optimize their outcome.

Reference

1. Dahanayake DMA, Rohanachandra YM, Wijetunge GS. Factors affecting age at presentation of Autism Spectrum Disorders: A descriptive survey from a child mental health clinic at Lady Ridgeway Hospital. *Sri Lanka Journal of Psychiatry*, 2015; 6(1): 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljpsyc.v6i1.8054>