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Autism: It May Not Be What You Think

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There are many misconceptions about autism. Many people believe that if a trend or characteristic is common in autistic people, that it must be a diagnosing factor. However, every person is unique, and the presence or absence of a trend or characteristic is not in itself a defining factor. Below are ten common misconceptions and realities about autism:



Myth: All autistic people are nonverbal, will never talk, or could talk if they wanted to.

Reality: Many autistic people do improve their verbal skills, often through interventions such as speech-language therapy. In addition, talking is only one way of communicating. With early intervention and identification, these children can develop other functional ways of communicating. They can supplement their lack of or reduced verbal skills with pictures, alternative/augmentative communication devices, computers, and/or sign language (South Carolina Autism Society, n.d., ¶ 3).



Myth: All autistic people have an intellectual disability.

Reality: Autistic people who have difficulty communicating do not always have an intellectual disability. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. (2013), intellectual disability is characterized by "Deficits in intellectual functions, such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience" (p.33), whereas the diagnostic criteria for autism examines social communication/interaction and patterns of behavior – not intelligence (p.51). However, some autistic people also have an intellectual impairment.



Myth: All autistic people are "geniuses," have a gift or talent, or are intelligent.

Reality: Autistic people may have a varied range of IQ scores. Some autistic people may exhibit extraordinary skills such as remembering a wide range of dates and events, adding large numbers without a calculator, or playing Bach and Beethoven on the piano by age three (Sicile-Kira, 2004, p.3). However, these same children may have difficulty with change, new routines, and maintaining a conversation. Just like everyone else, autistic people have their strengths and weaknesses.

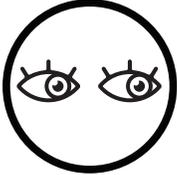
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(cont.)



Myth: Autistic people cannot learn.

Reality: Figuring out how autistic children learn is often a challenge. Some are visual learners. Others learn by physical performance. And others learn mostly by listening. When given support and an appropriate teaching style, autistic children learn.



Myth: Autistic people do not make eye contact.

Reality: Contrary to popular belief, many autistic people do make eye contact. However, it may be less frequent and more of a visual gesture than a way to communicate intent (Autism Society of America, n.d., ¶ 6).



Myth: Children who demonstrate excessive disruptive behaviors, such as having tantrums, hitting, and throwing items, are autistic (East Tennessee State University, n.d., ¶ 1).

Reality: The disruptive behaviors may or may not be a result of autism. It is important to look at the reasons why children might behave this way in addition to any diagnosis.



Myth: Children will "outgrow" autism.

Reality: Autism is not something that can be "outgrown." With effective treatment and accommodations, children may show significant progress and improve their ability to carry out their activities of daily living.



Myth: Autistic people cannot show affection.

Reality: Just because people may not be able to verbally express feelings does not mean that they are incapable of conveying emotion. Understanding how autistic people convey feelings takes patience and hard work (SCAS, n.d., ¶ 4). Once a caregiver/teacher learns and understands the way(s) autistic people can express emotion, the reward can be priceless.



Myth: All autistic people have sensory issues.

Reality: Many autistic people have sensory issues such as limited physical contact or repetitive body movements. However, non-autistic people have sensory deficits as well. The presence or absence of a sensory component alone cannot diagnose autism.



Myth: Autism can be cured with special diets.

Reality: Many professionals and parents who place autistic children on special diets claim to have seen significant progress. However, there is no conclusive data supporting special diets as a cure.

Resources:

American Psychiatric Association (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
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 South Carolina Autism Society (n.d.). Myths, fables, stories, legends, fiction, and misunderstandings. Retrieved December 30, 2008, from <http://www.etsu.edu/cpah/commdis/AutismSociety/myth.asp>

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