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What Is Savant Syndrome?

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Savant syndrome is a rare condition where people with various developmental disorders, including autism, have remarkable talents or abilities that seem to contrast their overall limitations and functioning (Treffert, n.d., ¶ 1). Individuals with savant syndrome typically show special talents for music, mechanics, math, and/or art. These talents are always linked with phenomenal memory skills.



Savant syndrome may exist with other conditions. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) states that about ten percent of individuals who have autism have “savant” skills (2008, ¶ 14). Musical “savant” skills, blindness, and autism often occur together. Although there is no known cause of savant syndrome, there are some reports of premature

birth history with these individuals (Treffert, n.d., ¶ 2).

What Are Some Savant Skills I Might Notice?

The following are some typical “savant” skills according to Darold A. Treffert, M.D. (2008):

- Music (playing piano by ear almost always with perfect pitch)
- Art (drawing, painting, or sculpting)
- Math calculations at “lightning speed” (computing multi-digit numbers quickly)
- Mechanical (putting together detailed machines/motors)
- Spatial (memorizing detailed maps/routes or computing distances accurately just from visualizing)

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(cont.)

Some “savant” skills that occur less frequently are:

- Language (learning multiple languages)
- Sensory (discriminating smell or touch)
- Time (knowing how much time has gone by without seeing the clock)
- Knowledge (knowing information on specific topics such as neurophysiology, statistics, history, or navigation)

Helping a Child with Savant Syndrome



Focus interventions on improving social behaviors, language skills, and general independence and functioning for daily activities. Use the child’s strengths and talents as the basis for

treatment. For example, if music is a “savant” skill, incorporate music into a speech/ language session. Some ways to do this are:

- Start and end the session with music to help signify transition
- Take turns playing musical instruments such as a drum to encourage turn taking
- Encourage joint attention on the object and requesting of the object by having the teacher/ therapist hold the instrument at the start of the activity
- Follow the child’s lead with an instrument to encourage shared play

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[133 – Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\)](#)

[198 – Autism: It May Not Be What You Think](#)

Resources

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (updated May 2008). Autism and Communication – NIH Publication No. 99-4315. Retrieved December 12, 2008, from <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/autism.htm>

Treffert, D. A. (n.d.). The Savant Syndrome: Islands of Genius. Retrieved December 30, 2008, from http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/savant_syndrome/savant_articles/islands

Treffert, D. A. (2008). The Savant Syndrome: Islands of Genius – Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved December 30, 2008, from http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/savant_syndrome/frequently_asked_questions#q4

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