THE NEAR-NORMAL AUTISTIC ADOLESCENT

What are the characteristics and problems of a mildly autistic child in the difficult years between puberty and adulthood? A correspondence panel of parents and professionals from the British and American National Society for Autistic Children attempted to bring together some observations on this topic. Parents drew on first-hand experience at home and in their work for NSAC. The professionals considered pupils or patients whose mildness of handicap seemed to call for special management or education techniques.

Altogether, approximately 50 children were compared. The majority of these were boys, of whom 11 are now adults. It would have been desirable to include some girls now adults, but none was well known to panel members. Information on a larger sample of near-normal autistic adolescents of both sexes in a full age range could alter the conclusions that the panel reached.

The near-normal autistic person has some adaptational advantages over his severely autistic counterpart in terms of potential for education and employment. Yet it is a mistake to assume that he therefore has few problems. His autistic handicap threatens the successful outcome of every undertaking which involves other people. It is a controlling factor in his life, regardless of how well he adjusts to his limitations or compensates for his disabilities.

The following report is a summary of characteristics described by the panel for the near-normal autistic adolescent. It includes the areas of language, human relationships, awareness of disorder, and special talents, as well as some management problems observed in each of these areas.

Language

Nonreciprocal Speech

Although some autistic children do not talk at all, mildly autistic children are often handicapped by a tendency to talk too much when they are exceedingly interested in a topic. It does not occur to them that listeners may not share their enthusiasm. So they talk on, concentrating on what they are trying to say, without any reaction to signs of boredom. Such a monologue is not easily interrupted or changed in its course by the comments of others; therefore, the to-and-fro of normal conversation is missing. At best, the autistic person is a poor listener, and sometimes he seems to be completely unaware of the fact that somebody is trying to talk to him. If a listening handicap is basic to autism, and

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it may well be, then the autistic person is no more helped by scolding, "Listen, will you!" than a blind person is helped by the shout, "Look out!" Such warnings alert them to error but do not offer guidance.

Parents often report that the mildly autistic child needs several moments to process any remark he hears. It may be wise to teach him to explain this when he cannot understand somebody at a normal rate of speaking. Even if full comprehension is impossible at social gatherings, he can often get away with practicing the art of listening while others talk. But he has to learn that in some situations, such as on a job, it is necessary for him to speak up when he fails to understand and ask for written instructions. In school, he may get along by memorizing lessons in advance, but this technique applied socially makes him a bore because he tries to steer the conversation to topics he has anticipated.

With training in using whatever listening skills he can acquire, the autistic person may eventually improve his ability to converse, but he will always be uncertain whether he has said too little, enough, or too much for the needs of a certain situation. Such awareness comes from being able to interpret responses of others as one is speaking. This is most difficult for the autistic person, who can heed only one thing at a time and tends to be lost in his own thoughts.

**Literalness**

Literalness in an autistic person goes far beyond the literalness that is associated with young children or retarded individuals. It results from the underlying communication disorder, which makes him unable to understand the shifting meaning of words in changing situations. In addition, he tends to persevere in his first impression rather than discarding it to test other meanings.

For example, one young adult who is a musician called his parents to find out what would be suitable to clean the keys of his piano. His mother suggested he use a moist rag with plain Ivory soap. Some time later, he called back to say that he had searched a catalogue of piano supplies without locating this special soap for ivory. No ordinary person raised in the atmosphere of American advertising would so long have overlooked the brand name of a common household soap.

Some literalness is based on a phrase or sentence rather than a word of several possible meanings. This was the case when an autistic young man at the 1970 conference of the National Society for Autistic Children in San Francisco would answer such audience questions as "Do you have a hobby?" with a simple "Yes." No more, unless another question followed. A different question might bring out a longer answer than was wanted. For example, somebody asked an autistic teenager how he learned to type. Instead of just indicating the source of his instruction, he said, "For the first lesson I practiced the letters f and j." No doubt, he would have covered the entire keyboard if he had not been stopped after he had described several lessons in detail.