

# UNDERSTANDING AUTISM IN AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

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January 2015

# WHAT IS AUTISM?

- ❖ Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological, developmental disorder that lasts throughout a person's life. People who have ASD have abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication. They have a limited repertoire of activities and interests. They often have problems integrating their senses. Autism is a spectrum disorder in that some people are highly intelligent and verbal, while others are severely cognitively impaired and nonverbal.
- ❖ Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by marked difficulty in communication and social relations and by the presence of atypical behaviors such as unusual responses to sensation, repetitive movements, and insistence on routine or sameness.

To date, there is no one intervention that is effective with all children with autism spectrum disorders. Effects of ASD impact a child's ability to interact, communicate, relate, play, imagine, and learn

# MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS VS EDUCATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

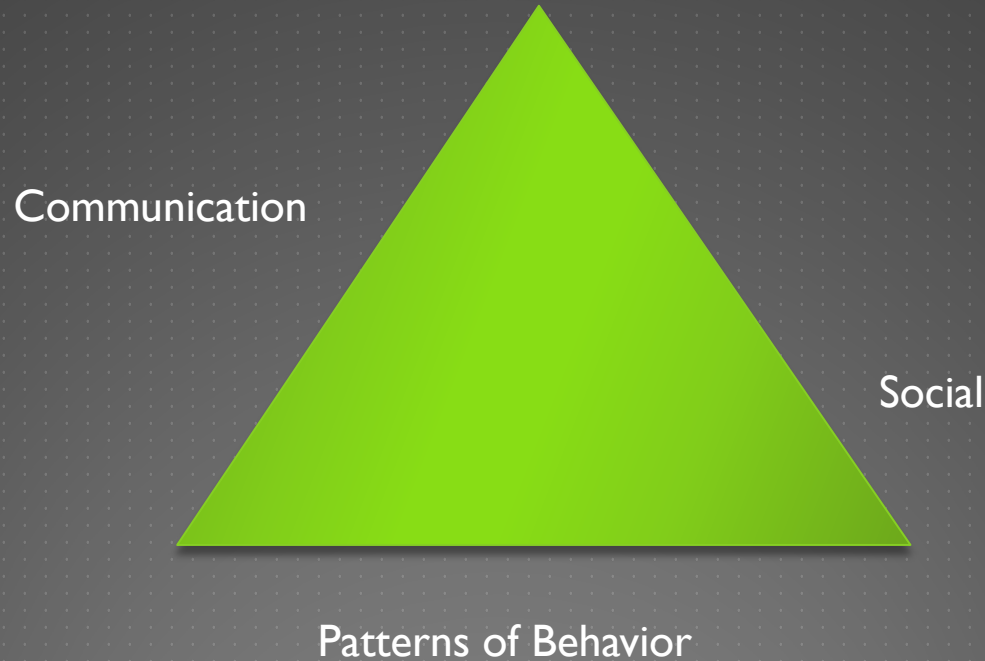
## Medical

- ▶ Based on a set of criteria (DSM IV-R)
- ▶ Is classified as a specific disorder (Asperger's)
- ▶ Impact can be mild to severe
- ▶ May be determined by individual or team
- ▶ Diagnostician's have a variety of titles, training, expertise

## Educational

- ▶ Based on law (IDEA, ECEA)
- ▶ Refers to eligibility category
- ▶ Must show educational impact
- ▶ Only applies to the school setting with educational supports
- ▶ Must be determined by a team

# TRIAD OF CHARACTERISTICS



- ▶ Students with ASD can: Learn and progress • Enjoy relationships with friends and family • Live independently or semi-independently • Work and participate in their community

# SOCIAL INTERACTION

“The child displays significant difficulties or differences or both in interacting with or understanding people and events”

- ▶ Typically problems noted in social interaction include:
  - ▶ – Failure to develop peer relationships
  - ▶ – Inability to create social exchanges and understand the feelings of others
  - ▶ – Inability or limited ability to use and understand non-verbal cues
  - ▶ – Impaired ability to share experiences with others
  - ▶ Qualitative differences in reciprocal social experiences

# COMMUNICATION

“The child displays significant difficulties or differences which extend beyond speech and language to other aspects of social communication, both receptively and expressively”

- ❖ Communication is the single largest deficit area for people with autism. The communication skills of persons with autism impede their ability to interact in a social context, make wants and needs known, & exhibit the knowledge they have acquired.
  
- ▶ Common communication problems include:
  - ▶ – Delay or absence of verbal language
  - ▶ – Impaired conversational skills
  - ▶ – Repetitive language, Echolalic language
  - ▶ – Difficulty in understanding and using abstract language

# PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR

“The child seeks consistency in environmental events to the point of exhibiting significant rigidity in routines and displays marked distress over changes in the routine, and/or has a significantly persistent preoccupation with or attachment to objects or topics.”

## ▶ Stereotypical behavior:

- ▶ – For example: flapping, spinning, light filtering
- ▶ – Insists that routine be followed even when the routine is non-functional
- ▶ – Preoccupation with and attachment to objects or parts of objects
- ▶ – Narrow scope of interests
- ▶ -Rigidity in thinking & behavior

# LEAST DANGEROUS ASSUMPTION \_ (ANNE DONNELLAN, 1984)

- ▶ The criterion of LDA holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults.
- ▶ *Furthermore* we should assume that poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy rather than to student deficits.

*The Least Dangerous Assumption is to design educational programs and provide supports based on that presumption.*



# EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

- ▶ General Education Classroom-With or Without support
- ▶ Special Education Services-Always Consider Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Academic support, Social Skills support, Behavior support, Speech/Language, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Community Based Instruction, Vocational training, Life Skills instruction

- ▶ Educationally Address core components of ASD-
  - ▶ Cognitive Development/Learning; keep student's learning trajectory close to same age peers
  - ▶ Behavior; increase student's ability to meet the demands of the environment
  - ▶ Communication; increase student's ability to understand and use language functionally
  - ▶ Integration Strategies; increase a student's ability to process, make sense of and appropriately respond to multiple sensory demands of the environment
  - ▶ Transition to adult life and services; increase independence to include problem solving & access to leisure activities & the community

# GENERAL TIPS

## Most students with autism are Visual Learners:

- ▶ Respond well to pictures & line drawings
- ▶ Can combine text with pictures
- ▶ Use manipulatives and visuals to understand abstract concepts
- ▶ Need simple instructions
- ▶ Do well with visual instructions; written instructions (if they read)
- ▶ Require lengthy projects be broken into small parts
- ▶ Need to be given problem solving cues – Information presented in a sequential format

## Academic Expectations:

- ▶ Expectations need to be kept in line with abilities
- ▶ Abilities cannot always be determined in traditional ways
- ▶ Expectations that are not attainable will usually lead to disruptive behavior
- ▶ Expectations worded in 'If/Then language' or that allow the student to answer these 4 questions; what do I do, how much do I do, how will I know I'm finished, what happens next