

The Growing Need for Psychologists in the Intervention for Autism Spectrum/Pervasive Developmental Disorders

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This article originally appeared in the NH Psychological Association newsletter.

I just hung up from the fifth call in three days from a parent requesting services for her child who had just been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. I have no openings, nor do the psychologists to whom I usually refer. My colleagues in developmental pediatrics, child psychiatry, speech/language pathology, and pediatric occupational therapy are similarly overwhelmed by referrals. We aren't bragging when we say that we have a long waiting list. We are bemoaning the limited availability of services for children on the Autism Spectrum and their families.

Those of us who work with children have witnessed the emergence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (Pervasive Developmental Disorders) as one of the most prevalent and most troubling challenges for today's families. A relatively rare disorder when many of us were in training, autism and its related disorders (Asperger Syndrome, PDD-NOS, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder) are estimated to affect between 1 in 250 and 1 in 1000 children. Thus, Autism Spectrum Disorders are now more common than Type I diabetes and cancers in children. The financial cost of autism has been estimated at \$26 billion annually. The emotional cost is exponentially greater. Families struggle not only with the direct impact of the disorders but also with the frustrating and often confusing process of securing comprehensive intervention programs. Even as resources are hard to come by, more data confirm our hypotheses that early and intensive intervention is critical to eventual outcome. Most importantly, the joy of seeing engagement in a child who previously was unavailable for learning and socialization affirms the belief that we need to find a way to do more.

For children and adolescents on the Autism Spectrum, a "best practices" intervention focuses upon the development of functional communication skills, the enhancement of social awareness and interaction, the acquisition of adaptive self-regulatory and daily living skills, the growing ability to show knowledge and skills on demand, and the learning of functional play and coping skills. And that's before we even begin to work on academics! Effective intervention requires the coordinated efforts of a multi disciplinary team of family member(s), educators and special educators, paraprofessionals, occupational therapist, speech/language pathologist, physician, and behavioral consultant and/or psychologist. Ideally, a psychologist should be a member of the team, but all too many teams do not have access to someone from our discipline. The specifics of methodology will differ across students, but a best practices approach typically includes a combination of incidental learning, direct teaching (including, but not restricted to, Applied Behavioral Analysis and discrete trials), communication therapy, occupational therapy (often involving sensory integration techniques), play experiences (such as floor time), "ADL" training, a comprehensive behavioral support plan, and community-based experiences. Obviously, this is a tall order!

Psychologists are uniquely equipped to assist children, families, and systems as they attempt to fill this tall order. As a professional discipline trained to address both research and clinical

issues, psychologists can often help families and other professionals sort through the myriad “promising” treatments. Our evaluation skills (especially in the principles of developmental and dynamic assessments) are indispensable in the diagnostic process and in the measurement of outcome. Many of us possess expertise in functional assessment of behavior and other aspects of applied behavioral analysis. Our training in systems theory and change allows us to guide the team through the dilemmas of behavioral challenges, bureaucratic assumptions, and reimbursement nightmares. Our clinical expertise can support a variety of psychotherapeutic interventions, ranging from floor time with the child to psychotherapy with an overwhelmed sibling or parent, to behavior management training, to family and/or marital therapy. In short, we have skills that lots of people need. And they need our skills right now!

As a practicing psychologist in New Hampshire for the last seventeen years, I have witnessed wonderful growth in the “state of psychology” in the state. There are more of us than ever before, addressing more challenges more creatively than ever before. But there aren’t enough of us working with children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders such as those on the Autism Spectrum. The few of us who do this type of work have waiting lists too long for any family to have to endure. Similarly, there are too few psychological consultants to address the school districts’ needs for knowledgeable and reasonable assistance. Hence, we need more of you.

At this point, there do not seem to be enough of us who enjoy working with children, adolescents, and adults on the Autism Spectrum. Or maybe I just don’t know enough people! In either case, the families (and I) need to know about you. If you have a practice that includes working directly or in consultation with individuals on the spectrum, please let me know (tlbsqt@mindspring.com). If you don’t have much experience with autism spectrum disorders but do enjoy working with “kids,” let me know that, too. Finally, if this is an area you want to know more about, let me know.

From many years of experience working with children with autism, I can say that few experiences warm my heart like the first joint attention and smile from a child who was previously aloof. Few accomplishments are more “accomplished” than the oral book report given by a student who couldn’t talk at all in preschool. And few things feel better than the news that the adolescent with Asperger Syndrome has just been invited to a sleepover! These are the human connections and triumphs that make us forget the headaches of managed care and keep us coming to the office day after day. Please help.

*Dr. Bolick has an office in Nashua and consults to families and schools throughout southern NH. She presents frequently on topics related to Autism Spectrum Disorders and other neurodevelopmental challenges. Her book, *Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Helping Preteens and Teens Get Ready for the Real World*, was released in September 2001.*