

Guest Column

What About Autism?
By Lynn Epstein



If a tree falls in the forest does it make a sound? Depends if someone is listening. Since May is better speech and hearing month, here are some facts about communication development and disorders.

Let's start with the strategies for effective listening, which involve the following conditions: being a quiet listener, maintaining focused attention, minimizing distractions, allowing no interruptions and "being like Switzerland," which is to say listening with neutrality.

Did you know that people prefer to be spoken to in their right ear? In addition, people are more likely to perform the task if told in the right ear. Not sure if this will work on all husbands...but you can try! Studies suggest that the preference is linked to a right ear/left brain advantage for language processing.

Another interesting tidbit is that studies have shown a link between the regular use of everyday painkillers and hearing loss, particularly in younger men (American Journal of Medicine, March 2010).

It is important to remember that communicating is more than just talking. Communication means mutual understanding between speaker and listener. Some say that 90 percent of language is nonverbal, including gestures, body posture, and facial expressions.

Pragmatic communication skills involve the ability to use language versus behavior to engage others. This includes the ability to use words to greet, make requests, comment, ask for help, relate experiences and edit messages when they are misunderstood.

This is where autism comes into play. Children on the autism spectrum have severe difficulties in the area of pragmatics. Currently, one in 70 boys will be diagnosed with autism.

As a spectrum disorder, autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, in any combination, that can exist in any degree of severity. That's why two children can be diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum but demonstrate different capabilities. Many autistic children face the most challenges with social language skills and in understanding the intentions of others. Often times, autistic children (and adults) seem to be talking "at" you in a monologue manner, rather than engaging in an exchange of ideas and information.

Persons with autism may also exhibit some of the following traits: insistence on sameness, resistance to change; difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words; Echolalia - repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language; laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason, showing distress for reasons not apparent to others; a preference to being alone, aloof manner; not wanting to cuddle or be cuddled; little or no eye contact; unresponsive to normal teaching methods; obsessive attachment to objects; apparent oversensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain; no real fears of danger; non-responsive to verbal cues, acts as if deaf, although hearing tests are in normal range.

Contrary to popular belief, many children with autism do make eye contact; it just may be less often or different from a neuro-typical child.

The distinction between Asperger's Syndrome and a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder is the severity of the symptoms and the absence of language delays. Children with Asperger's Syndrome may be only mildly affected and frequently have good language and cognitive skills. Characteristic weaknesses that accompany Asperger's Syndrome include the following: difficulty understanding the intention of others; problems working as part of a group; difficulty with conversational skills and sustaining social situations; difficulty with critical thinking and analyzing information; difficulty with written expression; and rigid with routines and limits in mental flexibility.

Characteristic strengths that accompany Asperger's Syndrome include: great rote memory; better expressive language skills for topics they like, such as Leggos, videos, marine biology; a strong desire to relate to others; and the ability to perform better in a structured learning environment.

Autism is treatable. Children do not "outgrow" autism, but studies show that early diagnosis and intervention lead to significantly improved outcomes.

Call your friendly neighborhood speech language pathologist if you have any concerns or questions regarding your child's communication development. More information about autism and other communication disorders can be found at www.asha.org.

Lynn Epstein is a certified speech language pathologist with 25 years of experience working with toddlers and school age children. Her Laguna Beach Language & Speech Clinic can be reached at 715-5845 or www.Lagunabeachlanguagespeech.com.