

# Educating Autistic Children

Breaking through the barriers of isolation in the autistic child requires enormous perseverance and professional skill. The challenge for the educator is to organise and operate individualised programmes aimed at minimising handicaps and maximising potential.

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In St Paul's Special School in Beaumont, Dublin, education is provided for children from all over Ireland, who suffer from autism and related disorders. Some of the children are, in fact, multiple handicapped, being deaf and/or visually impaired as well as being autistic, emotionally disturbed, and mentally handicapped. Provision of education for these children involves use of teaching methods and programmes which are as varied as the needs of each individual pupil.

Autism is an extremely debilitating handicap which affects about 4 or 5 children in 10,000. It is estimated that approximately 20% of autistic children may have intellectual potential in the Average Range but they are completely incapable of functioning at this level because of their major cognitive deficits and their inability to develop interpersonal relationships. The basic impairments underlying autism make it difficult or impossible for the child to make sense of his environment even though he may be able to see, hear, feel, taste and smell and may have basically normal intellectual potential. Very often the child's innate frustrations are seen in violent temper tantrums, inappropriate and bizarre behaviour, irrational fears and complete rejection of any personal contacts. The whole pattern has a devastatingly traumatic effect on parents and on entire families.

Teaching autistic children is totally different from teaching normal or mentally handicapped children, as they have to be taught to relate to others and they do not respond to the same stimuli. Usually they are much more interested in objects than in people and the teacher must have an inexhaustible supply of patience, perseverance, behavioural techniques and teaching strategies in order to break through the barriers of negativism, rigidity, and obsessional inflexibility of the autistic child.

Probably the single most important factor in relation to the prognosis for autistic children is early diagnosis and placement in an appropriate educational environment at the earliest possible age. Accurate diagnosis is not easy. Because the child looks normal and may show "islets of intelligence", parents are often puzzled by his strange behaviour but do not know where to go for help. Sometimes, doctors are unfamiliar with the symptoms of the syndrome and valuable time is lost before the child is referred to a comprehensive assessment facility. Inappropriate behaviour patterns become more rigid and inflexible, and the child retreats further and further away from the world of reality.

The children in St Paul's demonstrate a wide variety of ability levels. The condition of autism can occur at any intelligence level, but there is a marked bias towards the lower levels of intelligence and many of the children are mentally handicapped as well as

autistic. However, the pattern of cognitive skills and deficits is quite unlike that of children who may be assessed as functioning in the same overall range of intelligence. The strengths tend to apply to memory, visuo-spatial tasks, mathematical computation and sometimes, music. Deficits usually concern processes of symbolisation, abstraction, communication processes and socialisation. Many autistic persons never acquire speech. Those who do develop language often use a collection of stereotyped phrases rather than using it for social communication.

The challenge for the educator is to organise and operate individualised programmes with the aim of minimising handicaps and maximising potential. The autistic child's areas of strengths must be broadened into learning areas and his obsessional behaviour channeled into productive uses. Every fleeting instant of eye contact or personal interest must be utilised to gain his attention to what we want him to learn.

The educator must pierce the rigidity and stereotypy that pervades all aspects of autistic children's functioning. They can be taught new skills - they sometimes learn isolated skills very quickly - but they seem unable to generalise what they have learned to new situations and new tasks. They fear and resist change and prefer a routinised, highly predictable existence.

Unlike normal or mentally handicapped children, autistic children must be taught to play. They do not generate their own spontaneous, imaginative ideas to make a mental picture for pretend and make-believe play. They may line up objects or put them into patterns, doing the same thing over and over again and getting very distressed and aggressive if somebody interrupts them. They rarely use toys appropriately - spinning the wheels of toy cars for hours on end, or feeling the surface of things, or piling the plates of a tea set on top of each other, or spinning them while flapping their hands and making unintelligible piercing sounds. They may be pre-occupied with light switches, may spend hours flicking a piece of string, may indulge in repetitive head banging or self injury. They may develop unusual attachments to particular objects irrespective of their function such as stones, statues, cups or a particular picture. The teacher must try to find some positive element in these activities and try to use it as a basis for social and educational development. For example, the favourite piece of string may be used as a reward for the child's participation in the gym lesson or he may be allowed watch the spinning of the record player for a few minutes after he has done his classroom exercises.

It is most important to have a uniform approach by all staff dealing with autistic children. Teachers, Nursing and Care Staff, work consistently towards the same goals and objectives. The curriculum includes development, number concepts, cookery, sewing, and all Primary School subjects at whatever level is appropriate for individual children.

As with any other group of children, autistic children are individuals, each one with a different personality and a widely varying degree of potential, handicap and behavioural abnormalities. Variation in teaching methods and materials helps in finding some means of contact and arousing the interest of the children.

Autistic children present many problems of management in the classroom. The severity and nature of these problems vary considerably from child to child and the methods of managements must be varied accordingly. The teaching environment must be

organised so that specific skills can be actively encouraged and specific undesirable behaviours can be modified. Short periods of formal work can be alternated with activities which the child chooses to do. It is necessary to establish some degree of social control - the child may be rewarded for sustained periods of eye contact. Problem behaviours can be broken down and eliminated in small steps towards the ultimate goal. The teacher must work on the gradual increase of positive behaviour at the same time as on the gradual reduction of problem behaviours so that the child can benefit from the learning situation.

Finally, we can conclude that autistic children present a challenge to educators everywhere. While the cause of autism is still unknown and so far, no cure has been found, some children have responded dramatically to education and treatment in an appropriate environment. However, many autistic persons need sheltered employment and care throughout their lives and services for adolescents and adults are inadequate in this country at the present time. It is unfortunate that some of those who have made excellent progress in educational areas have regressed when the After-care Services do not meet their need for specific programmes to enable them to continue to achieve at their full potential.

The syndrome of autism affects about 4 or 5 children in every 10,000, causing varying degrees of handicap and abnormal behaviour.

Autistic children benefit from educational programmes set up on an individualised basis to meet their specific needs.

St Paul's Special School in Beaumont caters for autistic children from many parts of Ireland.