

Triad of Symptoms for Autism in respect of implications for Inclusive Setting: an Analysis

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Abstract

Paper is a celebration of the pioneer work of Wing and Gould (1979), who broke many myths about autism and dissolved the line of division between two camps of leading researchers Leo Kanner and Asperger regarding concept of autism. They observed there are three domains of deficit named as 'triad of impairments' namely- social interaction, communication/imagination and restrictions/repetitions in self-chosen behavior to remove the confusion about two views of autism Wing further divided the autism in to three subgroups namely- aloof, passive, and active but odd. Author tried to explain all the three impairments in terms of observable behaviors and deficit these cause. Further theses deficit has been evaluated in terms of academic and social problems an autistic child can face. Possible remedies are pointed out to make inclusion possible for an autistic child. In the end author suggests inclusion could be accomplished by two prong strategy- inclusion program and compensation program. Compensation program should be supporting, out of school to make the deficit of communication and social skills and inclusion program strives to include the child in normal classroom. The emphasis should shift from compensation to inclusion as time passes to make the transition smooth and effective.

KEYWORDS: autism, triad of impairments, inclusive setting, inclusive program, compensation program

Autism is a unique disability with unknown origin, appears before age of four and affects more than one dimensions of child development. Child may have awkward physical appearance, odd social behaviour, poor cognitive performance and communication deficit. There are many more behavioral trades which vary widely not well documented due to absence of generalization. Medical diagnosis will not find much fault with body and mind, but behavioral scientists have different opinion about wellness of the child. In behavior domain also there can be more than one dimension of deficit to varied extent in different individuals' thus making it difficult to generalize the phenomenon of autism.

Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger, two leading researchers of the 1940s, had used the word 'autism' independently of each other popularly known as two camps of autism. Kanner's studies placed emphasis on "autistic aloneness", with children lacking the desire for social contact. Speech was acquired late and was often bizarre and non-communicative, and the children's play habits were isolated and repetitive. Asperger used "autism" to describe children who, unlike Kanner's subjects, had proficient if idiosyncratic verbal skills. The eccentricities in their social behaviour and their frequent strong attachment to a particular interest or topic of conversation prompted Asperger to dub his young patients 'little professors'.

On the basis of behavioral information of autistic children Wing and Gould's (1979) revealed three domains of impairment named 'triad of impairments'. These are impairments in social interaction, communication/imagination and restrictions/repetitions in self-chosen behaviour. Social interaction included items like body language, greeting, comfort seeking/giving, awareness of others' feelings, awareness of social rules, imitation and play, joint referencing; communication/imagination includes comprehension and use of language, speech characteristics, non-verbal communication, imagination and pretence and restrictions and repetition in self-chosen behaviour includes stereotyped movements, preoccupations with objects, sensory responses, patterns of interest, maintenance of sameness.

Wing claimed 'autistic children do have imagination', 'but it is not social'. Wing and Gould reviewed the data they assembled from Camberwell, and concluded that autism diagnoses could not be divided into two such distinct camps as proposed by Kanner and Asperger. As per Wing 'The idea of a neat barrier between Kanner's autism and the others was rubbish'. Wing and Gould dissolved this confusion by refining the general diagnoses of autism into three more subgroups- 'the aloof', 'the passive', and 'the active but odd'. The 'aloof' group encompassed those described by Kanner, content in their world of 'autistic aloneness' building concepts of his own. Those in the 'passive' group might allow others to lead them in social interaction, but would soon drift back into isolation if left to their own devices, in other words they need to be carried along for any activity social or academic. 'Active but odd' children would engage socially, but might struggle to hold a two-way conversation, make eye contact or read body language correctly. Odd mannerism is the most visible characteristic of this group. Taking lead from the above discussion and pioneer work done by these researchers author attempts to elaborate characteristics of autistic children in respect of subgroups and in general, their implications for inclusive setting.

A) Impairments of social interaction

a) The aloof group

This is the most frequent form of social impairment found in majority of autistic children. Their behavior may have following signs:

- seems to 'be in a world of their own', i.e. he is alone even in a group;
- acts as per his own rules and ignores social rules;
- behaves as if no body else is there;
- has no concern for happenings around;
- no eye contact with person he is interacting;
- no interest even if he is addressed and if matter concerns to him;
- has expressionless face, extreme joy, extreme anger or distress with no obvious reason;
- is indifferent to happy or sad moments;
- uses body language instead of verbal or non verbal;

- sometimes may respond to rough and tumble play well, but when this stops return to aloof pattern and
- aloofness sometime may means savant syndrome

Implications for inclusive setting: the child in the aloof group is difficult to socialize and involve in classroom activities. They fail to make friends and get approval of others. Although teacher is bound to attend the child but peers feel repelled in extreme sense. They earn names and become prey for bullying, child abuse, harassment, and may even become subject of cruel entertainment for others. This is due to the fact that other children do not understand their actual handicapping condition in absence of an obvious sign as in case of other disabilities. This lack of sensitivity is further enhanced due to odd mannerism natural with autistic children. Due to lack of eye contact and social skills they can't easily be benefitted from classroom instruction. They fail to attract attention of the teacher, get ignored and lack behind in academic tasks. They feel dejected and a vicious circle of failures starts which isolate them in class. This means there is low scope of inclusion of an autistic child

b) The passive group

Least common group among autistic children, the behavioral features include:

- better compromising behavior than aloof group;
- accepts social rules;
- may meet the eye contact of others;
- may become involved as a passive partner of a conversation;
- initiative are missing, but can be good follower;
- hearing may not be listening due to poor focus of senses;
- feelings are still distorted and mechanical;
- some may be cognitively superior to be categorized as autistic savants

Implications for inclusive setting: as the child is acceptable in terms of gestures as well as language abilities. He can be well adjustable in teams and group working; this gives us a hope for inclusion. As there is lack of focus of senses and feeling which makes learning tasks difficult to come by. There is a sure possibility of participation in co-curricular activities resulting in partial inclusion. In inclusive situation there are good chances that autistic child may acquire some social skills, manners and establishing relations like making friends. Some of the autistic children may exhibit savant syndrome should definitely be mainstreamed and special skills must be nurtured and given a chance to flourish.

c) Active but odd

Autistic children in this group are active in all domains of development, but this activeness lacks a direction and productiveness. Child may exhibit characteristics like:

- active with irrelevant reasons;

- too energetic but unable to convert it in to synergy;
- paying little or no attention to the other's expectations;
- poor eye contact although sometimes may stare too long;
- may hug or shake hands too hard;
- show behavior opposite to the occasion;
- lacks control on senses;
- difficult to evaluate in respect of cognitive ability;
- may give first impression of enthusiastic individual;
- exceptional speech in terms of loudness, tone, rhythm etc.

Implications for inclusive setting: these children can be handled in inclusive situation by a skillful teacher. There can be strategies like biofeedback, behavior modification, contractual behavior, modeling etc. to make child manageable and acceptable. Activeness of the child can be channelized by involving in simple activities which are aimed at some specific skill improvement. There can be activities used to improve voice, language, social skills and control over the senses. Once the child becomes communicative and socially accepted there is huge possibility that simple cognitive skills may be inculcated. Small steps towards simple goals can work in the individualized education program of the child. The big advantage of this group is they have tendency to be part of social order which helps in increasing domain of learning experiences.

There is another group of autistic children which was not reported by Wing (1979) and came through statistical analysis of observed behaviors of autistic children. This group is known as 'Over-formal, stilted group' usually observed in later life, this behavior is common in the most able or least affected person with autism. They tend to displayed following characteristics:

- more of withdrawal kind rather than acting out;
- too much careful to accept changes in routine;
- values people but not relations;
- unreasonably polite and formal;
- have a acceptable level of language proficiency;
- too sensitive in selection of cognitive activities;
- try hard to stick to the norms of social interaction without really understanding them;
- does well once practice a skill

Implications for inclusive setting: although this group is almost exclusively of adult age, but even then inclusion is a desired phenomenon, although it may not be in school. Learning is still needed for which social inclusion is a prerequisite. Individual in this group is actually withdrawal type which is needed to be encouraged and reinforced for furthering the social participation. He must be made a functional and productive citizen of the society, which is the real aim of special education and rehabilitation initiatives.

B) Impairments of communication

a) Using speech

Kanner pointed out the delay or absence of speech in his diagnosis of autism. Use of speech varies from not at all (in 20% of cases) to a very good level of language. Common speech problems include:

- echoing words they listen (echolalia);
- associating language with actions, i.e. language is basically seen in terms of daily routine work meaning there by abstract language is missing;
- grammatical problems with language, especially missing of linking words like 'in' 'on' 'because' 'under.' This makes language a fragmented one;
- unnecessary details are included in language;
- abstract and briefness of language is missing

Implications for inclusive setting: there are some problems which can be tackled by teacher himself, but he may seek help of speech therapist, counselor, psychologist and even a doctor. Teacher could smartly seek help of classmates of the child for improving language skills. Absence of skills to understand abstractness of language could be converted in to concrete form by associating possible objects and actions with words. There may be still problem to learn meaning behind the poems, phrases, formulae of mathematics and science. But as we know inclusion is not about learning abstract things rather giving experiences of childhood one deserves and making him functional for leading a respectable life.

b) Understanding speech

There is also problems with understanding of speech as well, the characteristics may include:

- find difficult to understand use of multiple meaning words;
- gets confused between words having same or even similar words e.g. peel, peal; wheel, while, seat, sit etc.
- don't understand symbolic words and phrases, rather takes it literal. For him 'he has eaten my head' would mean actually eating of head physically;
- can't make meaning of typical vocabulary related to literature, humorous social situations, manners etc.

Implications for inclusive setting: understanding can be enhanced by using simple words and sentences. Contents need to be explained in more than one media including technical and technological aids. Practice of speech, teaching with recorded speech with gradual increase of speed and complexity can improve speech understanding skills. Teacher must encourage the autistic child to speak which improves social interactions hence forces the child to understand speech. In other words this can not be too big a hurdle to prevent inclusion.

c) Pitch and voice control

- mechanical and monotonous voice;
- problems with volume of air used to produce sounds, may be too loud or too low, too quick or too slow;
- absence of rhythm and appropriate tone

Implications for inclusive setting: these are not huge problems, just making the child aware about importance of pitch and voice control in speech and feedback strategies can reduce the defects. There is even need to educate the peers to ignore the odd vocal voices occasionally produced by the child. Mechanical voice pattern can be corrected with practice and presenting models to copy for appropriateness.

d) Using and understanding non-verbal communication

Beside verbal communication there is lot of problems with non verbal communication. It includes gestures, subtle eye movements, postures and body parts movements. This actually puts gap in the condition of comprehensiveness of communication. Thus a person with autism is unlikely to develop additional communication skills and whilst some of the more severely impaired can learn some manual sign language they will never use them spontaneously.

Implications for inclusive setting: although non verbal communication is equally important, but it's absence does not prevent the child from being included in a normal classroom. Non verbal communication can be improved by encouraging the child to participate in cultural activities, role playing and specially designed environment where use of symbols, signs and gestures are necessary condition for communication.

D) Repetitive stereotyped behaviors

Many people with autism display stereotyped activities. These may be simple ones such as:

- repeating sounds and words;
- repeating work routines with robotic movements;
- repeating perceptions like- tasting, smelling, feeling, listening to some mechanical noises; activities like- tapping different surfaces, switching lights on and off, twirling some objects, head banging etc.

Implications for inclusive setting: there are number of problems which remain with the child himself, however it wastes learners cognitive energy. These problems could be reduced by making the child aware of their in appropriateness in social situation. Teacher can devise some games or activities which necessitate avoiding the compulsive repetitive behavior.

These simple stereotypes may last until adulthood. More complex stereotyped behaviors include:

- a complex sequence of bodily movements which is even not easy for normal persons;
- placing objects in strict routine which is difficult even to remember;
- detailed mealtime and bedtime routines;
- family sitting in exactly the same places at mealtimes;
- attachment to strange objects such as a bag or a mirror;
- collecting strange objects such as stones, electrical objects and the like;
- in more able people with autism, popularly known as autistic savants they can fascinate with their extraordinary abilities to remember news, telephone numbers, timetables, train numbers etc. for long time

Concluding remarks:

Although author has written everything in positive tone in favor of inclusion of autistic child in normal classroom, still it is not that easy a task. In inclusion setting we have normal children who have much higher speed of cognitive learning, much better on all sorts of developmental dimensions. It is very challenging task for making an autistic child acceptable to normal peers and vice-versa. Schools and teacher need to sacrifice professionalism in favor of including an autistic child in normal classroom. It is too heavy a cost we are demanding from school, teacher and society. There can be a via media to make this transition easy for an autistic child. Child should have an inclusion program as well as a compensation program. Compensation program should focus on preparing the child for inclusion by making up deficit for social and communication skills. In the initial stages of education more time and effort should be devoted to compensation program than inclusion program. The proportion of time and effort keep on increasing for inclusion and decreasing for compensation. Finally once the child is ready for transition whole focus should shift on inclusion. This strategy may make the child delayed for one to three years compare to a normal child, but it will make the inclusion a reality indeed. In the end we can say inclusion for an autistic child is not simply a process rather a challenge which we (teachers, parents, peers, siblings, special educators and other professionals) should accept and win for him, as he himself may not put an iota of effort for it.

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