



FLM-FS-11-03-R09

# Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder: When Does Your Child Need Professional Help?

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Most adults will tell you that in their childhoods, they never heard the word "autism." But now, it is a rare individual who does not know of a family with an autistic child. Similarly, more of us today have heard of a similar developmental disorder, Asperger's Syndrome. Somewhat less often, we learn about children who suffer from Nonverbal Learning Disorder.

Stories about autism and related disorders have become more common as studies have documented the increased incidence of these serious neurological disorders in children. In February 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that the prevalence of autism reached 1 in 150 children, roughly 6.7 cases per 1,000 children aged 8 years old or younger. Other studies estimate the prevalence of Asperger's Syndrome at 1 in 500 children. Finally, as many as 1 in 100 or about 1% of children in the United States may suffer from Nonverbal Learning Disorder, a less serious but more common form of developmental difficulty in children's communication abilities. Statistics like these are enough to frighten any parent!

## What Are Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder?

Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder are all neurological disorders, which means they are dysfunctions in the way that the brain processes information. Autism and Asperger's Syndrome are both classified as Pervasive Developmental Disorders. This means that children's behavior is characterized by severe and pervasive impairments in social interaction skills, communication skills, and by stereotyped behavior, interests, and activities. Nonverbal Learning Disorder shares many of the same characteristics, but generally to a lesser degree of severity. It is important for parents to keep in mind, however, that a related and much less severe type of problem, dyslexia, shares many characteristics in common with these more serious disorders.

## Autism

Autism is the most serious of these disorders. Autism develops within the first 2½ years of life, and is often seen as early as 4 months. Boys are affected by autism much more often than are girls.

At its most basic, autism can be defined as an extreme inability to communicate with or respond to others. It is called a “spectrum disorder” because various symptoms and characteristics may be exhibited in a wide range of combinations and degrees of severity. Children with autism:

- seldom make eye contact or show appropriate facial expressions, body postures, and gestures, and they usually do not talk, or in other ways attempt to participate in conversations;
- lack interest in the things and events around them;
- tend to repeat actions (for example, finger flapping or twisting); and
- have limited interests.

### **Asperger's Syndrome**

Like autistic children, children with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) are unable to create and maintain social relationships. They are likely to develop repetitive actions and have extremely limited interests and activities (for example, an interest in dinosaurs that develops into an obsession).

Asperger's Syndrome differs from autism in that AS children:

- acquire language at a normal or even accelerated rate in infancy and childhood;
- exhibit rigidity in their thinking that may become problematic;
- are often clumsy;
- may do well at visual spatial tasks (such as drawing or identifying which part in a picture is missing);
- may do well at visual motor tasks (such as puzzles or mazes); and
- are unable to produce written work.

### **Nonverbal Learning Disorder**

Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD) is not a recognized psychological diagnosis. It is, however, a term that is being used by many psychologists to

describe children with difficulties that are similar to, yet unique from, autism and Asperger's Syndrome. Like children with autism and Asperger's Syndrome, children with NLD have difficulty making friends and have difficulty understanding nonverbal signals in social situations. They tend to learn language at a normal pace, but may have trouble using it appropriately in social situations. They also have difficulty with mathematics and learning from experience. There is no difference in the number of girls and boys who develop this disorder.

### **What Do Parents with Concerns Need to Know about Getting Professional Help for Their Children?**

First, studies suggest that children with these neurological disorders may be helped a great deal, and the earlier the help begins, the better. If you notice that your child is having difficulty talking with, playing with, and responding appropriately to others, he or she might benefit from professional help.

Second, if you are concerned that your child needs professional help, don't panic and don't wait. Simply take your child to your pediatrician and/or a clinical psychologist as soon as possible for an evaluation. And remember, even though most children begin to use simple words by 15 months and simple phrases by 24 months, development psychologists report that failure to talk before age 3 is not necessarily a sign of a serious neurological disorder. In addition, some children exhibit poor relationship skills simply due to a lack of opportunity to learn more appropriate skills. These children will improve dramatically with a little extra training.

Third, if your child is having difficulty, be sure to get a thorough evaluation by a skilled expert. As can be seen in the descriptions above, the behaviors that characterize these disorders are so similar that it may be difficult to tell one from another. Yet a correct assessment is critical to designing an appropriate intervention program for your child.

## What Can You Do to Help Others with a Child with Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, or Nonverbal Learning Disability?

One of the best things you can do to support families is to understand a little about these disorders. In addition, you will be doing a great service to the family, as well as to the child with autism, AS, or NLD if you help others (especially children) understand why a child behaves as he or she does, or what types of behaviors to expect from a child with one of these disorders.

To learn about these disorders, go to the library and ask to borrow one or more of the wonderful books on these topics that are written for parents and nonprofessional audiences. Helpful books about autism include: *Let Me Hear Your Voice: A Family's Triumph Over Autism* by Catherine Maurice (Fawcett Books, 1994) and *Right From the Start: Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism* by Sandra Harris and Mary Jane Weiss (Woodbine, 2003.) Some books about Nonverbal Learning Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome include: *Helping a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome* by Katheryn Stewart (New Harbinger, 2002) and *Bridging the Gap: Raising a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder* by Rondalyn Whitney (Perigee, 2002).

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