

The Triad of Impairments

In recent years, studies of infants and children without handicaps, as well as work with children with autism and related disorders, have contributed to our understanding of the autistic conditions, which are now generally regarded as disorders of development. The central problem is a triad of impairments affecting social interaction, social communication and imagination. The triad is often accompanied by a limited, narrow, repetitive pattern of activities. Recent research has shown that the skills of social interaction, communication and imagination are, like other developmental skills, dependent upon aspects of the function of the brain although the precise areas involved have not yet been identified.

Essential Features of Autism

1 Impairment of Social Interaction

Examples

- i) The most severe form is apparent aloofness and indifference to other people, although some people with autism enjoy certain forms of active physical contact.
- ii) In less severe form, the individual passively accepts social contact, even showing some pleasure in this, though s/he does not make spontaneous approaches.
- iii) Some individuals with the triad approach other people spontaneously, but do so in an odd, inappropriate, repetitive way and pay little or no attention to the responses of the people they approach. (NB Even the aloof group may become more sociable with increasing age, though few, if any, become appropriate in social interaction or form real friendships with age peers.)

2 Impairment of Social Communication

Examples

- i) Lack of appreciation of the social uses and the pleasure of communication. This is also true even of those who have a lot of speech, which they use to talk >at= others and not with them, appearing uninterested in comments of others.
- ii) Lack of understanding that language is a tool for conveying information to others. They may be able to ask for their own needs but cannot talk about feelings or thoughts.
- iii) Poor comprehension of the information conveyed by gesture, miming, facial expression, bodily posture, vocal intonation, etc.
- iv) Lack of use of gesture, miming, facial expression, vocal intonation bodily posture, etc to convey information. Some more able people do use gestures but these tend to be inappropriate and do not convey information

- v) Those with good vocabularies have a pedantic, concrete understanding and use of words, an idiosyncratic, sometimes pompous choice of words and phrases, and limited content of speech.

3 Impairment of Imagination

Examples

- i) As children, an inability to play imaginatively with objects or toys or with other children or adults.
- ii) A tendency to select for attention minor or trivial aspects of things in the environment instead of an imaginative understanding of the meaning of the whole scene (eg attending to one earring instead of a whole person, a wheel instead of the whole toy train, a switch instead of the whole piece of electrical apparatus, reacting to the needle used for an injection while ignoring the person who is giving it).
- iii) Some individuals with the triad have a limited range of imaginative activities which may be copied, for example from TV programmes, but they pursue these repetitively and cannot be influenced by suggestions from others.
- iv) Lack of understanding of the purpose of any pursuits that involve an understanding of words and their complex associations, eg social conversation, literature, especially fiction, poetry, etc. There is a consequent lack of motivation to indulge in these activities, even if the necessary skills are available. Some verbal autistic people are fascinated with words but do not use them as tools of communication and social interaction.

4 The Triad of Impairments is accompanied by:-

Repetitive, stereotyped activities

These can take simple or complex forms. Individuals of higher levels of ability tend to show more complex routines.

i) Examples of simple, stereotyped activities

Flicking fingers, objects, pieces of string, etc; spinning objects or watching things that spin; tapping and scratching on surfaces; inspecting, walking along and tracing lines and angles; feeling special textures; rocking, especially standing up and jumping from back foot to front foot; tapping, scratching or otherwise manipulating parts of the body; repetitive head banging or self injury; teeth grinding; repetitive grunting, screaming or other noises.

ii) Examples of complex, stereotyped activities involving objects

Intense attachment to particular objects for no apparent purpose; a fascination with regular repeated patterns of objects, sounds, etc; the collection, for no apparent purpose, of large numbers of particular objects such as plastic bottles, pebbles, or the tops from tubes of Smarties.

iii) Examples of complex, stereotyped activities involving routines

Insistence on following the identical route to certain places; insistence on a lengthy bedtime ritual; repetition of a sequence of odd bodily movements.

iv) Examples of complex, verbal or abstract repetitive activities

Fascination with certain topics, eg electricity, astronomy, birds: asking the same series of questions and demanding standard answers.

NB The above are examples of stereotyped activities. The possible variations on this theme are endless. It is thought that in many instances, routines, obsessions or stereotyped activity help to reduce anxiety by introducing internal controls or predictability.

The level of disability will vary in accordance with the developmental and intellectual level of the individual and will be influenced by personality.