

Module 5 : Understanding and Dealing with Autistic Behaviour

- Understanding autistic behaviour patterns
- Comprehending the purpose of and motivation behind such behaviour
- Understanding behaviour and setting limits
- Recognising when children's behaviour shows autistic traits

In this module, we will take a look at autistic behaviour, including:

- Understanding autistic behaviour patterns
- Comprehending the purpose and motivation behind such behaviour
- Understanding behaviour and setting limits
- Recognising when children's behaviour shows autistic traits
- Learning what Theory of Mind is and how it relates to autistic individuals

5.1 Autistic Behaviour

The first thing to remember regarding unusual autistic behaviour is that it is typically an attempt to cope or communicate.

It is important to know what causes challenging behaviour in people on the autism spectrum in order to develop practical ways of managing it. To do so, we must (a) closely examine why people on the autism spectrum have behavioural difficulties, (b) understand the purpose of their actions, (c) find effective and healthy ways to manage it, and (d) know where to get help.

As we've mentioned previously, the world can seem like a tremendously confusing, daunting, and isolating place for autistic people. This is often due to fundamental difficulties with communication and social interaction. Remember the example that was given previously, about playing a game where the autistic person is the only one who hasn't been taught the rules; imagine how frustrating that could be.

Often, overwhelming experiences and problems communicating are the root causes of difficult behaviour among autistic individuals. If people are unable to express how they feel through language, or don't understand their feelings, they may be expressed in different ways. Frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, and even hunger or sleepiness, may all be expressed through behaviour.

This challenging behaviour can arise during everyday communication, a myriad of social situations, moments of change or upheaval, or generally unstructured periods of time. This behaviour can also manifest itself due to trouble with sensory processing or sensory overload, bullying at school or in the workplace, or because of underlying medical issues.

With better understanding of why autistic people can display unusual or challenging behaviour, we can begin to investigate their typical behaviour patterns and how to recognise them.

5.2 Understanding Autistic Behaviour Patterns

One key characteristic of people on the autism spectrum is that they exhibit restrictive and repetitive behaviour patterns.

These can commonly include, but are not limited to:

- An overwhelming interest in a specific topic
- The intense need to stick to routines and rituals
- Repetitive movements like hand flapping and spinning
- Hypersensitivity (over responsiveness) or hyposensitivity (under responsiveness) to sounds and other sensory stimuli
- Insistence on eating the same colour of foods every meal
- Refusal to wear anything but clothes of certain colours or materials

While we understand that autistic people can display repetitive behaviour such as hand flapping, there are other similar motions that they may also make. These can include finger flicking, jumping, spinning, twirling, head banging, and other complex body movements. This self-stimulatory behaviour is known as stimming. Obviously some may be more harmful or distracting than others, both to the autistic person and to people around them.

Some autistic people may display particularly challenging behaviour when they are in unfamiliar or overwhelming situations, as a way of coping with the circumstances. Remember, while these can include more obvious scenarios like travelling somewhere new, being in a noisy and crowded setting, or starting at a new school, they can also include relatively minor changes in the daily routine or having furniture rearranged in the house.

Autistic behaviour can also increase or become more elaborate during the holidays, when moving house, or during other periods of change, stress or illness.

Some of the more common challenging or potentially harmful behaviours autistic people can exhibit include self-injurious behaviour, pica (the act of mouthing or eating non-edible items), smearing, and physically challenging actions like spitting, hair pulling, biting and hitting.

Autistic behaviour may also include exhibiting being stuck, such as performing the same acts repeatedly, singing the same line of a song over and over, or insisting on sticking to routines and rituals.

Other behaviours may include lining up or ordering objects, or obsession and preoccupation with certain items or subject matters.

People on the autism spectrum may also take part in repetitive use of objects, obsessive touching of certain materials, or extreme insistence on wearing clothes made of certain materials, which can be a way to deal with sensory sensitivity.

This sensory sensitivity is so prevalent and distracting to autistic people that even speciality clothing manufacturers are emerging who make autism-friendly garments. While they appear to be common clothing items, the garments are made of materials that people on the autism spectrum typically prefer, and are free of the seams, buttons, zips and tags which can irritate. This is just one example of methods that can be employed to help autistic people cope with everyday life and eliminate harmful, challenging or distracting behaviour.

It is also important to understand that some people on the autism spectrum may actually enjoy their behaviour. They consider it a useful mechanism for dealing with stress or change, and some will even find a sense of happiness and relaxation from it.

However, while obsessive, repetitive behaviour and insistence on routine can bring joy, it also has the ability to limit a person's involvement in other activities and cause distress or anxiety, particularly in social situations. It is important to remember that these behaviours, obsessions and related anxiety in autistic people are not the same as having Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which is an anxiety-based mental health condition.

It is also important to recognise that the various behavioural traits of autistic people, as long as they aren't harmful or particularly challenging actions, can provide them with the outlet they crave to clear their minds. Obsessions, for example, provide much-needed structure, order and predictability in a world that can otherwise seem overwhelming and confusing to autistic people.

What's more, special interests may be an effective means to start conversations with other people and feel more self-assured in social settings such as school and work.

5.3 Understanding Autistic Behaviour and Setting Limits

While it is certainly important to have a good understanding of autistic behaviour and why people may engage in it, many experts will advise that this should go hand in hand with setting boundaries for the actions as a method of helping autistic people with their social development.

First, concerning behaviour should be clearly identified. Many experts recommend a parent or carer keep a behaviour diary to document when and how often it seems to occur. Then, reasonable and manageable limits should be set. These will likely start off very small but increase with time. For example, no spinning for 10 minutes or only talking about trains three times a day.

There are a few key points that must be considered when working to limit challenging behaviour in autistic people.

Keep in mind that:

- Complete consistency with setting and maintaining limits is absolutely essential
- Instructions should be given in short, simple sentences, as too much communication can cause "information overload"
- Rewards and motivators can be helpful to encourage acceptable behaviour
- A period of relaxation can help defuse challenging behaviour, including running outside, jumping on a trampoline, looking at a lava lamp, smelling essential oils, or listening to music.

Once a person on the autism spectrum exhibits success in adhering to such boundaries, the time restrictions can be gradually increased, and other limits can also be introduced. Autistic people will have a far greater chance of success if the limits start off small and increase gradually.

In addition to setting limits and boundaries, other methods include engaging in more beneficial activities that can be distracting and are intended to replace concerning autistic behaviour, such as playing games or participating in healthy activities the child enjoys, attending clubs, classes or other structured recreational and extracurricular activities.

So, to help with autistic behaviour, let's recap the following steps:

- Understand why autistic behaviour may occur in the first place
- Intervene when concerning, challenging or harmful behaviour is exhibited
- Increase structure and consistency in the life of an autistic person
- Help with their skills development by setting limits and offering rewards
- Make use of obsessions to direct focus to more positive activities

5.4 Recognising When a Child's Behaviour Shows Autistic Traits

Among experts, it is commonly debated whether a child's behaviour can reflect autistic traits in early life.

Health professionals and autism specialists are more likely to notice certain traits that may indicate a child is on the autism spectrum.

Children later diagnosed with autism often seem neurotypical as infants, and, as previously mentioned, the onset of symptoms usually occurs at around age three, but they can occur earlier. When parents raise concerns early on, they typically revolve around potential learning disabilities, not a suspicion of autism - even if that later proves to be the case.

There are some signs in infants that an autism diagnosis may be made later, but as they are contradictory, they can be very challenging to pinpoint.

These include having a baby who is placid, undemanding and rarely cries. On the other hand, a screaming baby who is extremely difficult to soothe can also be indicative of autism. Of course, some babies cry frequently due to other health conditions like colic or gastric distress, while some babies are just naturally placid and unfussy, and neither may indicate autism - so it is understandable how this is difficult to recognise in infants.

Another early sign of autism in babies is a fascination with objects while perceiving to lack interest in people, animals and the world around them.

In toddlers, symptoms that are suggestive of ASD include a blank gaze and the avoidance of eye contact. A child may appear to not truly see other people around them or may only briefly make contact from the corner of their eye.

A perceived lack of hearing is also another key trait, such as when a child does not react to sounds around them or someone calling their name. This is why hearing tests and auditory processing tests are recommended.

Another sound-related sign of autism in a child is being unaffected by audible changes, due to potential abnormalities in their perception. A child on the autism spectrum may also have a fascination with certain sounds, while other sounds may cause extreme distress.

Restrictive issues surrounding food may also be indicative of autism. While they may just suggest a child is a picky eater, the utter refusal to eat anything but certain foods or foods of a certain colour can be a trait.

There are also many traits relating to social development that can indicate a child is on the autism spectrum. Lacking the ability to share a joint interest in objects with other children, not taking part in games, and not pointing out things, are all potential signs.

While these indicators can all hint at autism, it is important that parents don't fall victim to fear if their child exhibits some of them. Children who are developing as expected may still show a few of these traits from time to time. In addition, they may also hint at other things. Certainly, if the traits are noticed, it is worth investigating them, but autism shouldn't automatically be assumed if a child doesn't like playing with others or a baby doesn't fuss.

Parents who have concerns about their child's behaviour are typically recommended to speak to their paediatrician first. If necessary, they will then be referred to the appropriate specialists should autism or a related condition be suspected.

Of course, if a child's traits are assessed by the appropriate professionals and found to be the result of ASD, it is important to keep in mind that this condition can be very manageable, with many individuals on the autism spectrum enjoying a good quality of life, personal development, unique strengths, and success throughout their life.

The benefit of a diagnosis is that the right support can be put in place to help a child develop from their early years, and through school, to give them the best opportunity to deal with their challenges and allow for accomplishments in their personal growth.

5.5 The Concept of Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is the ability to attribute mental states, beliefs, intents, desires and knowledge to both yourself and others, and recognise that other people have their own, independent beliefs, desires, intentions, opinions and perspectives that can be different from your own.

Theory of Mind falls under the category of social cognition, also known as emotional intelligence. Social cognition plays a major role in a child's development, and a lack of it can be one of the challenges for people on the autism spectrum. This is sometimes referred to as "mind blindness".

In typically developing children, Theory of Mind develops naturally during infancy and early childhood. Children will watch other people and copy what they say or do, start recognising the emotions of others in simple terms such as "happy" or "sad", start to understand that they are different from other people, realise that people's actions are often based on what they want, begin to learn the consequences of their actions, and even play imaginative roleplay games.

When children struggle with Theory of Mind, they will have difficulty understanding the behaviour of others, explaining their own actions, conversations, telling stories, understanding the perspectives of characters in books or on television, playing pretend games, paying attention in social situations, separating fact from fiction, and making friends. People on the autism spectrum who struggle with Theory of Mind simply don't understand that others have their own plans, thoughts or points of view. They can have difficulty expressing empathy and comprehending the attitudes and emotions of others. They also take everything others say and do literally - unable to comprehend dishonesty, sarcasm or jokes.

In addition to investigating this phenomenon with people on the autism spectrum, the concept of Theory of Mind has also been tested amongst non-autistic children and those with intellectual disabilities. It has been found that the concept is primarily unique to those on the autism spectrum, although certain traits can be found in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and social communication issues. It may also be found in children with a hearing impairment, who have hearing parents and do not yet use sign language.

Also unique to people on the autism spectrum is the fact that when they do develop Theory of Mind skills, they will do so in a different way to others. First, they may understand hidden feelings, such as their own thoughts, opinions and phobias, before they grasp false beliefs, which are diverging beliefs about the world. Then they may begin to grasp empathy and display other signs of growth in

their emotional intelligence.

Theory of Mind is a concept that appears to be independent of intelligence, even though many people on the autism spectrum have average to above average intelligence.

With Theory of Mind, people on the autism spectrum also have difficulty comprehending when others don't know something. They have the ability to become very upset when asking a question if the person they are asking doesn't know the answer. This is especially true for those with savant abilities.

As a result of these challenges with Theory of Mind, it is easy to see how a lack of understanding can cause problems with communication and relating socially to other people. They can't always anticipate what other people will say or do, or that other people may have thoughts and emotions. Partnered with unusual behaviour and language delays, this can sometimes be a source of bullying in school for children on the autism spectrum.

Social cognition is central to children's understanding and ability to get along with other people. Theory of Mind lets people explain their behaviour to others and interpret their speech and behaviour by considering what they might think or want.

As a result of this lack of understanding, people on the autism spectrum may often seem self-centred, eccentric, unsympathetic and uncaring. However, it's important to understand that this isn't their fault or intention.

Given the significant difficulties autistic people can experience with social interaction, communication and understanding, it can be challenging to teach them to understand and acknowledge other people's feelings. However, doing so can be a great accomplishment for people on the autism spectrum.

It has been pointed out that many people on the autism spectrum feel very close to their pets and are highly nurturing and empathetic towards them. While they may appear to lack empathy or understanding of other people, this may hint at a lack of understanding about an autistic person's state of mind. This is just a theory but one that may be worth considering and exploring further.

One proven technique to cope with a lack of Theory of Mind is Carol Gray's highly successful programme of Social Stories. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. They describe scenarios that allow autistic people to better understand both themselves and other people. By participating in programmes like Social Stories, people on the autism spectrum may start to ask questions or see people in different ways. Doing so can lead them to have greater emotional

intelligence.

An in-school programme that can help is the evidence-based Roots of Empathy, in which new parents in a community bring their babies into a classroom on multiple occasions and children can learn about growth, needs and emotions. Through it, children learn to become more empathetic and develop better emotional literacy. Participation in such a programme can have a two-fold effect. First, it can help an autistic child in the class to understand empathy. Second, it can help other students to have more empathy towards each other, and subsequently, be more inclusive of the autistic child.

While people on the autism spectrum may lack Theory of Mind or be delayed in the development of empathy, it doesn't mean that they are completely unable to perceive the feelings of others.

As with social interaction, communication and behavioural delays, if emotional intelligence is worked on in a way that's suitable for autistic people, many will gain better abilities to understand others and become more aware of emotions, feelings and opinions - both in themselves and in other people.

5.6 What We've Learned

In this module, we have discussed unusual autistic behaviour and learned that it is typically an attempt to cope or communicate when communication and social skills are delayed.

We have reviewed the key characteristics of behaviour that many autistic people display, including restrictive and repetitive behaviour patterns such as:

- Obsession with specific topics
- The need to adhere to routines and rituals
- Repetitive movements like head banging and twirling
- Hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sounds and other stimuli

Furthermore, we learned that some people on the autism spectrum may enjoy or find solace in their obsessions and repetitive behaviours, which can be coping mechanisms and sources of comfort when they feel overwhelmed or uncertain. We also discussed the possible causes of distress that result in those behaviours being exhibited.

Clearly identifying concerning behaviour and helping to overcome or manage it can include:

- Understanding why autistic behaviour may occur in the first instance
- Intervening when particularly concerning behaviour is exhibited
- Increasing structure in the life of an autistic person to prevent harmful behaviour
- Helping with their skills development by setting manageable limits
- Making use of obsessions to direct towards more positive activities

We also looked at the traits infants and children may display that can indicate autism. In babies, however, it is important not to get too carried away with worry over certain traits as they can be contradictory and inconclusive.

Some of the common traits children exhibit that may result in an autism diagnosis are avoiding eye contact, not appearing to see or hear other people or even respond to their own name, fascination with some sounds and distress at others, lack of interest in playing with other children, not pointing out things to their parents, and refusal to eat anything but a certain food or a certain colour of food.

We also briefly discussed what to do if autism is suspected and how a diagnosis can be helpful in the support and development of a child on the autism spectrum.

Next, we looked at the concept of Theory of Mind and how children on the autism spectrum seem to lack it. We learned that lacking this emotional intelligence can make autistic people unaware that other people may have opinions, thoughts, feelings and emotions, especially if they differ from their own.

When people lack Theory of Mind, they may come across as eccentric, self-centred, uncaring or devoid of empathy, when they are simply delayed in their ability to comprehend that other people have thoughts and feelings.

Lacking Theory of Mind, combined with social, behavioural and communication issues can have a profound impact on autistic children, especially in a school setting. When the world is already a confusing and overwhelming place, the reactions of people who don't understand can be even more bewildering.

We also learned that there are several theories which explore how empathy develops in autistic people, as well as programmes in place, such as Social Stories and Roots of Empathy, that can help people on the autism spectrum better develop their own Theory of Mind. Just like training and support that can help with language and behavioural challenges, this can go a long way towards the positive personal growth of autistic people.

Take a Quick Recap Test

[viralQuiz id=93]

Summary

After completing this module, you should be able to recognise the most common types of unusual behaviour autistic people can exhibit, and the motivation or reason for it.

You should also have a better understanding of when and why such behavioural patterns may occur, and how to work with an autistic person to set limits on concerning or challenging behaviour. Remember, be consistent and take small, slow steps to make progress.

You should also now understand the typical traits that infants and children can exhibit which indicate autism spectrum disorder, although in infants they can be contradictory and confusing.

Finally, you should know what the concept of Theory of Mind is and be aware of the known lack of it in children on the autism spectrum. You should also be familiar with some of the theories surrounding emotional intelligence and empathy in autistic children, and the ways they can be developed in each individual.

Coming up next...

In the next module, we will take a more in-depth look at the common myths associated with autism spectrum disorder, working to address and eliminate misconceptions about the condition.

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