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Some myths about autism spectrum disorders

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication and by restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior. These are life-changing, family-altering conditions usually diagnosed in early childhood. Prevalence is rapidly growing in the last decades and currently one in 68 children in USA is affected by autism. With this kind of prevalence, autism is becoming one of the most prevalent developmental disorders and with that said, serious personal, family, medical and society burden. Many myths are following autism and in this article we are addressing to some of them.

Key words: autism spectrum disorders, myths

Myth: Autism is a relatively new and rare disorder

Historical description of a child, now known as autistic, was written back in 1799. The term "autism" was given by Leo Kanner in 1943 in his published paper "Autistic disturbances of affective contact" [1]. Until the 1970s, autism was considered a rare condition but could also be present in the population of people with

autism, it is very difficult to find intellectual functioning. Intellectual functioning includes problem solving, ability to learn, thinking abstractly, learning and memory. This can often be overestimated and often display an uneven pattern of skills. The IQ score is the average for those with autism; non-verbal, such as non-verbal communication, behavior skills, but score in the lower or above average in others, the varying degree of verbal understanding. A score half of the children with autism (44%) have average or above average intellectual abilities [1]. Identifying intellectually in a child with autism is very important for the further educational program and

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication and by restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior. These are life-changing, family-altering conditions usually diagnosed in early childhood. In last several decades, this group of impairment has shown a dramatic increase in the prevalence, which raises the clinical and scientific interest worldwide. The prevalence in USA is showing that currently one in 68 children is affected by autism [1]. With this kind of prevalence, autism is becoming one of the most prevalent developmental disorders and with that said, serious personal, family, medical, educational and society burden. Despite decades of research, etiology of autism still remains unknown [2, 3, 4]. Many phenotype variations and various severity within autistic children, suggests the association of multiple predisposing factors in the etiology of the disorder, interacting in compound ways with typical developmental course. ASD is generally perceived as the most genetic of all the developmental disorders.

Many myths are following autism and in this article we are addressing to some of them.

Myth: Autism is a relatively new and rare disorder

Earliest description of a child, now known that had autism, was written back in 1799. First description of autism was given by Leo Kanner in 1943 in his published paper "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" [5]. Until the 1990s, autism was a rare condition but rapid rise of the prevalence in the last decades, is putting autism

in the spot of many scientists, clinicians and general public [Table 1].

Each year the prevalence of autism raises between 20 and 30% or in the last 20 years the prevalence has increased in over 600%. Many states in USA experienced rise of the prevalence up to 1000% in the last several decades. In general, autism affects boys four to five times more than the girls or 1 in 42 boys and one in 189 girls [1]. Nowadays, autism is more common than childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes and pediatric AIDS combined. Reasons for this alarming rate are still remaining unrevealed. It is supposed that changes in diagnostic criteria, increased assessment opportunities, improved awareness at mental health professionals, teachers, parents and general public, as well as actual increase in autism cases are explaining this prevalence.

Myth: All children with autism will develop intellectual disabilities

At children with autism, it is very difficult to assess their intellectual functioning. Intellectual functioning includes problem solving, ability to reason, planning, thinking abstractly, learning and judgment. This can often be over/under estimated and they often display an uneven pattern of abilities. They may score below average in some areas of intellectual functioning, such as non-verbal skills or adaptive behavior skills, but score in the average range or above average in others, like working memory or verbal understanding. Almost half of the children with autism (44%) have average or above average intellectual abilities [1]. Identifying intellectual disability in a child with autism is very important for his/her further educational program and

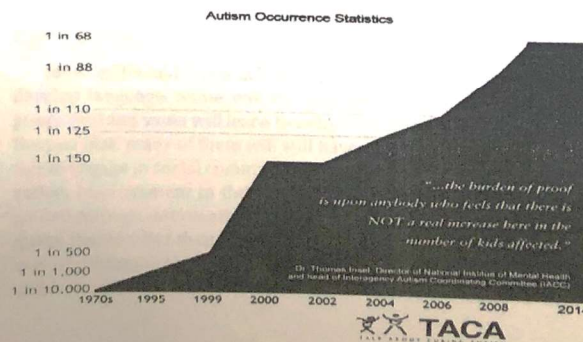


Table 1. Autism prevalence since 1970

providing best support in the learning and everyday life. Figuring out how children with autism learn is often a very difficult and time consuming job. They could be visual/auditory learners or learn by physical performance. When given appropriate support and a specialized teaching approach, many children with autism will learn. What is true about the autism is that many individuals have average or above average intellectual abilities but experience difficulties in relatively easy things that for the majority of the "normal" people are routine tasks in the daily living. Many individuals on the spectrum have finished high education and work in various professions but will still need some degree of support in the everyday life.

Myth: All children with autism are "geniuses" and have a gift or a special talent

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning its characteristics vary significantly from person to person. Knowing one person with autism means just that-knowing *one* person with autism. More and more professionals are referring to autism as "autisms", because each child's case is different, as are each child's causes and treatments. Children with autism have various IQ scores. Some children with autism can have extraordinary skills such exceptional memory, special mathematic skill, musical and art abilities, athletic or computer skills etc. [6]. But, those same children may have difficulties in adapting and social skills. Like everybody else, children with autism have strengths and weaknesses. In general, only 10% of people with autism have a special skills or so-called "splinter or savant skills", meaning skills in one or two areas that are above their overall performance abilities [7].

Myth: Individuals with autism are nonverbal and don't make eye contact

Most individuals with autism will eventually develop language. Some will develop poor language skill and some will learn to talk extensively. Despite that, many of them will still have difficulties to engage in social communication or conversation. Improvement in the verbal skills is often gained through interventions such as speech-language therapy. But then again, talking is only one way of communicating. With early interventions, children with autism have a chance to develop

other functional ways of communication. Deficits in language can be replaced with communication through pictures, communication devices, computers, sign language etc.

Contrary to general belief, many children with autism can make an eye contact. Though, it could be less frequent, in a different way or more as a visual gesture than a way to communicate and share. They may look as if they are ignoring other people, but some children with autism find making eye contact really difficult and unpleasant.

Myth: Autism is caused by a poor parenting or poor mother-child relationship

From the 1950s until 1980s, it was common belief between scientists that cold mothers or so called "refrigerator mothers" cause autism. But, autism is not caused by a specific parenting style, by the actions the parents do or something the mother did during the pregnancy. Today, we still don't know what exactly causes autism, but we know that this theory and similar ones like "cold parenting" are definitely untrue. Extensive research has shown that it is not caused by something parents did or didn't do.

Myth: The characteristics of an autism stay the same throughout a person's lifetime

Autism is developmental disability, which means that it has great impact on the development and can continue throughout the person's life. As the autism is influencing on the development, development is influencing on autism. Early intervention programs have as main goal to decrease the influence of the autism on the development and increase the influence of the development on the autism. Autism is a disability indeed, it is a profound and pervasive one, which affects nearly all aspects of life. But the symptoms will not remain the same across the lifespan. ASD presentation and characteristics can change throughout the person's life as they grow and children with autism can become adults with developed areas of skills and interest. But, individuals don't "grow out" of autism. Children with autism will become adults with autism. Currently, there is no cure for autism. Early identification and intervention can make a significant progress in child's skills and improve their ability to complete activities in

everyday life. Early identification and treatment doesn't mean better outcome but the change in the course of the disorder. Intensive treatment in many cases can reduce the intensity of the symptoms and provide for the children opportunity to develop adaptive skills for everyday living, behavior regulation, social and language skills and engagement. Autism is a life-long developmental disability, with age variations.

Conclusion

Autism is life-changing, family-altering condition usually diagnosed in early childhood. The prevalence of autism is on the rapid increase worldwide and children with autism will have to use a wide range of healthcare services for years, which requires specially trained mental health professionals. In the past decades understanding the nature of autism has been greatly improved mostly due to the data from the scientific investigations. Although, there are still unanswered questions to very important issues, like etiology of autism, it is now very clear that children with autism need early identification and intervention, in order to provide best chance to change the course of the disorder. Myths about autism can distort the reality and perception of the children with autism and that's why it is important to know them as they really are.

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