

The Concerns Regarding School Assessments for Educational Autism

By: Dr. Barbara Stanton

1. What is the benefit of an additional assessment in the school?

If a child is referred to me for an assessment, regardless of the diagnosis, if there are no problems in school there is no contact with them for services.

If a child is referred to me for an assessment and problems in school are identified after I diagnosis, for example, depression or anxiety, I send a confirmation of the diagnosis to the school and the process begins for a 504 or an IEP. At no time is there an assessment done by the school to see if the depression or anxiety is causing educational problems. My professional opinion is accepted. The primary disability is generally Other Health Impaired or Emotional/Behavioral problems.

If I diagnosis that child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, specifically Asperger's Syndrome, High Functioning Autism or Pervasive Developmental Disorder, NOS, there will be another assessment to determine if the autism is impacting the child's education (although the definition of education is vague).

It seems obvious that all children on the autism spectrum need support services in school. Even if there are not academic problems the child needs to have appropriate social supports in order to be successful later in life. As I continue to work with adults I find that their difficulties in college, employment and in the community could have been prevented had appropriate interventions been provided when they were children. Dr. Dean Mooney stated that rather than K to 12 planning we need to do 0 – 80 planning as these individuals are vulnerable to on-going social problems as well as mental health issues including an increased risk of suicide without proper supports.

It is not the role of school personnel to differentiate between pervasive developmental disorders and other mental health diagnoses. Yet, they frequently make these determinations, often incorrectly. Identifying an Autism Spectrum Disorder is very complicated as it is a neurological difference that impacts every aspect of a person's life; developmentally, socially, emotionally, cognitively as well as their ability to communicate. Professionals who conduct assessments must be up to date with the literature and the current issues. I am not sure that school personnel understand what goes into an assessment and that a diagnosis of autism is never given without a thorough assessment. It is not an easy diagnosis to share with a parent as it will change that child's life and the life of their family forever. Sometimes the school will not accept assessments for speech and language or occupational therapy from outside agencies.

Some school personnel will say that even though the child doesn't meet the criteria for educational autism it doesn't mean the child doesn't have autism. However, the reality is that the diagnosis is often called into question. I have had school personnel suggest

to the parent that they get another evaluation or find another professional to work with. This often contributes to an adversarial relationship between the school and the parent/professional. Also the interventions by school personnel will not be appropriate for the autistic child as they believe the issues are due to "something else".

I recently assessed a teenager and diagnosed him with Asperger's Syndrome. Within the past year two psychologists for different purposes (hospital and disability determination) also diagnosed him with Asperger's Syndrome. Yet the school believed that he did not fit the criteria for educational autism based on their assessment. He was failing every subject and having behavioral and social difficulties. No other explanation was given for the problems in school and he was denied special services. Due to a predictable problem he was suspended from school and is now, ironically, receiving services. We are not sure what will happen when he returns to school.

This can lead to...

"The label's not important."

Yes, it is.

It is important for accurate statistics.

It is important for proper interventions. An autistic child with an EBD label can end up in programs with children who have emotional and behavioral problems which, according to Dr. Ami Klin is the "worst possible mismatch".

The behavior becomes the focus of interventions rather than the autism.

For example, I worked with a girl with Asperger's Syndrome who did not meet the criteria for educational autism. The characteristics of AS that she needed support for were not addressed in a manner appropriate for her. She was treated like a child with learning and emotional problems which only exacerbated her difficulties. The parent withdrew her from school and is now home schooling her. She is doing very well.

2. Too often the individuals conducting the assessment are not properly trained or experienced with Pervasive Developmental Disorders.

Assessment results can be interpreted in many different ways. There have been times when the assessment results that a school feels indicate no concerns with autism I use to further support my diagnosis.

Teachers are often asked to fill out survey tools yet they are not able to differentiate between the complex characteristics of autism and other behavior. They simply have not had the training or experience.

For example I have often heard that children are making eye contact therefore can't have AS. These children are looking in the general direction of the speaker but the eye contact is non-functional. Without a complete exploration this can be missed. Also I have heard that children appear to have social skills but without a complete examination of the child's perception you can miss that they are directing play or are involved in parallel rather than interactive play. The appearance of doing something doesn't mean that it is being done competently or without significant stress.

3. There are not standardized tools for the assessment.

While there are some tools specifically for children on the Autism Spectrum they are often not used. Children on the autism spectrum will often score within the average range on several assessments normed for neurotypical children. Unless the evaluator understands which tools to use and which configuration of subtests to look at the autistic characteristics can be missed. Furthermore, there is no consistency to the assessment process or which tools will be used.

For example, a 16 year old was recently diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome by a mental health professional. The parent requested an assessment for educational autism due to the multiple problems the child was having in school. The assessment by the school team did not include a speech and language assessment or an occupational therapy assessment, both key elements determining whether or not the child meets the criteria for educational autism.

4. There is varying research regarding tools specifically used to identify Asperger's Syndrome.

Many schools use the Asperger Syndrome Diagnostic Scale (ASDS) yet several researchers find significant psychometric problems with this tool. Tony Attwood, PhD, believes that it is one of the weakest assessment tools.

While each child with an ASD is unique there are some who present with especially complicated characteristics. These are often the children who present the greatest challenges to school personnel. These are children who frequently are found to not fit the criteria for "educational autism" because the evaluators do not understand the multiple issues that can impact how a child presents. Medications, other health concerns, residential placements, or exposure to inappropriate interventions can all influence how the characteristics of an ASD are demonstrated. For example, medications can exacerbate mood problems and inappropriate interventions can lead to the development of maladaptive behaviors by the child. This are often overlooked by inexperienced evaluators.

There needs to be greater collaboration between the school and the mental health professional/parent.

In a nutshell....

In order to make a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder I have to identify all the characteristics that are a part of the criteria for educational autism (and then some). Children cannot turn the autism off and on depending on the setting but many do not display obvious problems in all domains. Just because a child does not have academic problems or behavior problems in school it does not mean that they are doing well in school. The social or communication limitations may not be very obvious to school personnel (many kids can mask the difficulties) but they all need support services whether or not the school has identified it. The school is the best setting to provide the speech and language services (such as social skills, pragmatic speech) and occupational therapy. If we wait until we see the signs then often the kids will have developed maladaptive behaviors that are more difficult to address. If we wait to develop a plan then the focus is on the behavior rather than the underlying cause; the social and communication difficulties.

Also if a child works hard to hold it together in school the parent may suffer the price of the stress at home as the child, who is overwhelmed by the demands of school, can melt down or rage at home. Again, supports to decrease the stress at school are critical for the overall health of the child.

When I think about the kids I know who are having the greatest problems in school it is because they did not receive early or appropriate support services. Again the focus is on behavior not the acquisition of skills that will ultimately decrease/eliminate the behavior. Remember that behavior is communication.

We all know that early intervention is the key to long term success. We must be proactive in providing support services. If we wait until the signs are there then we are too late. If there is an identified autism spectrum disorder, regardless of who makes the identification, there has to be interventions developed.

Sent: Saturday, February 21, 2009 12:26 PM
FROM: Stanton, Barbara K.
Subject: RE: ND Autism Educational Diagnosis