Understanding and Reaching out to the Psychological World of Children with Autism

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Abstract: *This paper tries to capture the essence of the psychological world of children with autism through describing their characteristics, their ways of social and institutional engagement, discussing what peers mean to them and knowing how they display their emotions and their sense of community. The text of the paper is based on extensive field observations and interviews with significant stakeholders in two varied settings: a special school for children with autism and an inclusive school where children with mild autism are given admission. An attempt has also been made alongside to suggest and describe how engagement with teachers, attitudes of parents and other students can be tapped as resources and strategies to reach out to these children and facilitate their inclusion in schools and society.*

One of the main obstacles in the life of children with autism is the inability to communicate with the world outside of their families, care givers, teachers, and friends. Kanner (1943), was one of the first few persons who described autism as a 'disorder of social affect'. Given this reality, inclusive schools face major challenges in promoting the socio-emotional well-being and inclusion of children with autism. The attempt in this paper is to build understanding about the psychological world of these children and suggest what parents and schools can do to meet their needs and characteristics and promote their socio-emotional well-being. The ideas expressed in the paper have been drawn from a year's fieldwork with children with autism in both a special school and an inclusive school. The fieldwork involved doing school and classroom observations, engaging in continuous dialogical interaction with the teachers and families of these children and also interacting with the children themselves. Some of the observations and insights that emerged are described below. They may be useful ways of descriptively knowing how children with autism behave and need to be dealt with. The strategies for reaching out to these children have been interwoven with the description of their needs and characteristics. The main aim of this article is to demystify and reach out to children with autism.

I would like to now share my field observations about the features and aspects that best explain their psychological world.

Emotions and their expression: These children often find it hard to recognise and control their emotions. They also find it hard to recognise the facial expressions of others, are not able to comprehend the emotions shown by them, especially those that they themselves lack. As a consequence, they come across as completely lacking in empathy towards others. This can be observed very clearly in inclusive classrooms. They have a hard time identifying subtle expressions of fear and anger. This persists through childhood and percolates to adolescence as well. There is some variation within the autism spectrum however in how emotions are identified and expressed. For instance, children with mild autism tend to show their feelings in a similar way to normal children, but usually find it hard to describe their feelings. They often say that they don't feel any emotion. At the same time, the same age

children with more severe autism seem to have flatter emotional expressions than those of normal children.

In general with all children with autism what is seen is that they rarely take the initiative to reach out or draw the attention of others. They are never seen to point out interesting things to other people and likewise, nor do they respond to interesting things that others point out to them. They are thus unable to engage in any kind of joint attention, which in fact is one of the early warning signs of autism. This deficit in joint attention is often what leads them into showing less concern for others and poor ability to comfort others. It makes them misread situations and respond with emotions that are off the mark. For example, a child with autism might not comfort a sibling or a classmate who falls over, or might laugh because he doesn't recognise that the child is hurt.

What was also observed was that children with autism have trouble understanding other people's emotions because of the way they scan faces. They spend less time looking at the eyes and more time focusing on the mouth. This means the information they get from a person's face tells them less about what that person is feeling.

Thus teaching children with autism how to 'relate' to others is important and the schools where I did my field work were emphasizing this, in addition to other 'social skills'. The focus was on teaching them appropriate ways to interact. What I observed however was that they always seemed a little out of sync, even with good training with normal children. Somewhere, they felt rejected or out of place. They were teased or left socially isolated.

I also saw that not only do children with autism have difficulty in interacting with normal children; it is also normal children who struggle in interacting with children with autism. Thus, it is important that both groups be taught how to relate to the other and feel comfortable in the relationship.

Socialization: The other important aspect where I found that a huge challenge for children with autism exists, is socialization. Learning by observing and following the leads of those who are more experienced, is one of the most natural ways of learning. In fact socialization occurs through interacting with others. It however requires the ability to relate to and stay engaged with others and follow their thoughts, feelings, and perspective. Since children with autism are deficient in these, their development does not follow the natural course of the process of socialization. Further, there is no social reference point for them from which they can know the other. Neither do they recognize that others could have thoughts, feelings, and perspectives that differ from theirs. They don't realize that the other person has information that is valuable to them, and so they can learn and "do better" by referencing those around them. As a result, they don't learn to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with even those who nurture and care for them. During my observations I saw that once the normal children feel comfortable with the child with autism, they enjoy being with them. They play with them from which their strengths and preferences can be inferred.

In fact, based on what I observed, I would recommend that teachers, aids, support staff, etc, should regularly set up and facilitate reciprocal interaction and cooperative play between children with autism and their normal counterparts. For, if the normal children feel "safe" with the children with autism, they will feel free to ask questions about behaviors and differences, as they play along. They can then be taught by the teacher how to support the children with autism through cooperative play, and ways to truly "include" such children. Peer support mediation works as an effective strategy in building relatedness.

How the need for emotional bonding with care givers unfolds: Children with autism do not perceive their primary care giver, be it a parent or a teacher as persons who are interchangeable. Rather they see the person as a secure emotional anchor in a relationship that needs nurturing. It is thus the relationship with the primary care giver that should become the focus and the catalyst for building

further social interaction and joint attention. Adjusting to multiple and varied care givers is difficult for them.

Friendship patterns: These children find it difficult to make friends. Parents and teachers can help them however to remain in contact with their peers and alongside work on the children's social skills. It was seen in the case of these children that even small friendships made them cheerful and happy. The problem areas identified in the case of children with autism in making and sustaining friendships, cited by their teachers and parents were: difficulty in starting and keeping conversations going; not comprehending what other people are thinking and feeling; inability to take part in other children's activities; not being able to understand their facial expressions and body language and difficulties in adjusting to new social situations. So these are the specific arenas in which they need skill training.

Peer mentors: A friend can also become a peer mentor to a child with autism on a voluntary basis. During my field observations I sensed that children with autism in an inclusive set- up gain more if peers volunteer and act like mentors. Typically, when the peer mentor sees his/her contribution to the child with autism, his/her emotional bonding with the child becomes stronger. It was seen in the inclusive school that teachers often use group activities in their classrooms, which become too overwhelming for children with autism. A single peer mentor works much better.

I would like to describe how a particular teacher prepared children to become peer mentors for children with autism. She began by discussing how a child with autism would probably not talk at first, but that did not mean that he didn't want to play with his classmates. She then instructed the children to begin by playing alongside (parallel play) the child with autism, do what he was doing and simply talk about how they felt doing it; without trying to direct it, change it, or prompt another activity. She told them to speak out only one sentence statements at a time, and not expect a response back. It was okay she said to simply sit

and "play with him" (parallel play) with minimal interaction. She then organized a role play with the students to practice playing with a child with autism. The only additional suggestion given was to smile whenever the child with autism looked at his/her peer mentor. Peer mentor training was then gradually extended to outdoor playground activities.

What emerges is that facilitated play through peer mentors should be built into the IEP of children with autism as early as possible, it builds up the social skills of these children. Peer mentors can be the child's friend at both home and school. Here is where home school continuity is important.

Promoting Social and Emotional Development: Teachers can use everyday interactions to help child with autism learn about feelings and improve their ability to express and respond to emotions. Some specific strategies that work, taking cognizance of the socio-emotional needs of children with autism are as follows:

- **Labeling emotions in natural contexts or activities that the child engages with:** For instance, when reading a book with the child, watching a video or visiting friends, teachers or care givers can point out different emotions to him/her. This will help the child to learn to identify emotions and their expression.

- **Be responsive to the emotions of the child:** Teachers, care givers and even peers must respond to the emotions that the child shows, by saying, for example, 'you're smiling, you must be happy' etc. This will encourage the child to show his/her emotions and learn reciprocity.

- **Encouraging looking at others and building eye contact:** These children must be encouraged to look at the person they are interacting with and making eye contact. This can be done gradually but must be an important target goal.

- **Using emotion cards** that have pictures of faces, either real or cartoon, to teach

Expressions India

children with autism how to identify and name basic emotions.

- **Using 'The Transporters'** which is a DVD that uses transport characters can be helpful to teach emotions to children with autism. Likewise, 'Mindreading' is a DVD that uses actors to show emotional expressions in faces and voices. It uses computer game formats to help children learn emotions.

- **Social Stories'** is a highly structured program that uses stories to explain social situations to children with autism. A story or comic strip conversation that incorporates how a child feels and how others feel might be useful for some children with autism.

Children with autism can learn to be more emotionally responsive, but even when they have these skills, they tend to use them less than other children. This deficit is common across the spectrum. It simply does not come naturally for them. Teachers and parents have to make this a target goal and 'teach it' or 'strive to achieve it through sustained inputs'. Some suggestions that may help which I observed in both the institutional contexts that seemed to work are:

- Engaging in frequent group activities, where sharing, taking turns, helping each other out, and coordinating actions together are emphasized and practiced. These can be routed through any daily activity from playing catching, or with a toy, doing planning together, shopping, anything else where two or more persons are involved in doing something together. This will encourage some emotional responsiveness.

- Position them in a manner that the child with autism can see the face of the person trying to interact with him/her and make eye contact more easily.

- Using more non-verbal communication (animated facial expressions, exaggerated gestures, excited vocal noises) and fewer words to guide and share emotions. The less the words, the more the child with autism has to make face contact for information.

- Creating moments of uncertainty by leaving out information, pausing and hesitating, or creating simple barriers or breakdowns in the interaction. This requires the child to refer to others to find out what to do, or repair the breakdown

Conclusively I would like to say that the socio-emotional needs of children with autism are no different from those of normal children, but their social and emotional characteristics require special engagement. At the same time, there is no one strategy that works with all children or matches the needs of all children, since their contexts and severity on the spectrum vary. What cuts across as a basic need for all of them is to be listened to, feel respected, safe, secure and accepted. It is important to also understand that when children with autism are part of an inclusive classroom, the social behaviors of normal students also get enhanced. Inclusion thus has a dual advantage.

During my field observations what I saw was that every child with autism had a desire to connect with others. It was difficult to see it visibly at first but it could be perceived in a more nuanced way. Basically, when teachers, care givers and peers made reaching out gestures towards children with autism, especially when through their gestures they could communicate to the children that they knew what they wanted, helped them to feel safe in the relationship or knew what their preferences are, they were able to connect and make some effort to relate. What I would like to emphasise as an overall picture is that children with autism in inclusive schools get overshadowed by children who are mentally challenged, physically disabled or affected by cerebral palsy. This is because their disabilities are visible and teachers know some ways of handling them. In contrast, children with autism, especially those with mild autism do not draw that much attention since they appear to be normal and they are also fewer in number in inclusive schools. In fact it is only in the last few years that they have begun to get admission to inclusive schools. In the special school in contrast,

Expressions India

the variations in their behavior are a function of the degree of severity of their autism, but since they are with peers of similar abilities, they show fairly close social bonding with them and seem quite secure in their school environment. The unanswered question that thus remains is: Whether children with autism are better off in a special school or in an inclusive school?

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