

A young child wearing a blue cap and a yellow visor is looking at a laptop screen. The background is a soft, out-of-focus orange and white gradient.

Developmental Disorders In Children

How many times do we hear the phrases “He/she is just lazy” or “He/she daydreams a lot”, freely used to describe a child who is struggling at school? Are you aware that more often than not, the real reason for a child’s failure to meet the demands in school is due to a learning or developmental disorder?

Over the last decade, there has been increasing awareness of childhood developmental disorders. It is important to know that with early identification and intervention by health and education professionals, children with developmental disorders have every chance to lead normal and happy lives.

What Is A Developmental Disorder?

A developmental disorder occurs when a child does not acquire normal developmental skills expected for their age. This affects their ability to learn, behave and socialise. Although a developmental disorder may be present from birth, it often does not become evident until a child is challenged with more complex social and cognitive tasks.

What Are The Various Types Of Developmental Disorders?

There is a wide spectrum of developmental disorders, the most common of which include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and specific learning difficulties such as Dyslexia and Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Two conditions which are increasingly profiled by the media are ADHD and autism.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

What Is ADHD?

ADHD is a behavioural and developmental disorder, not an illness. It is a condition of the brain that makes it hard for children to control their behaviour. With medical treatment, understanding and care, a child with ADHD can live a normal life.

How To Recognise A Child With ADHD?

A child with ADHD may exhibit one or more of the following behaviours:

- Inattention - difficulty in concentrating, forgetting instructions, moving from one activity to another without completing a task etc.
- Impulsivity - acting and talking without thinking, inability to wait for their turn, interrupting others etc.
- Overactivity - difficulty in sitting still, talking too much, restlessness etc.

The above symptoms must clearly be more severe than in other children and are present for more than six months, before suspecting that the child may be suffering from ADHD. All young children have a limited attention span and sometimes do things without thinking. A diagnosis of ADHD is usually made only when a child is older than 6 years of age although symptoms may occur earlier.

How Common Is ADHD?

Large-scale Japanese and American studies have shown that between 2% - 7% of school-aged children (6 years old and above) suffer from ADHD.

Assessment And Diagnosis

There is no one diagnostic test for ADHD. A diagnosis can only be made after information is collected from the parent, other caregivers and the child's teacher. The information is usually gathered with the help of a standardised questionnaire which the parent and teacher are asked to complete. A diagnosis can be made by an experienced paediatrician, child psychologist or child psychiatrist.

To confirm that a child is suffering from ADHD, the symptoms need to:

- Be present in more than one setting (i.e. home and school).
- Be more severe than in other children of the same age.
- Be present for more than six months.
- Cause difficulty for the child to function normally at home and/or school.

Treatment For ADHD

There is no proven cure for ADHD currently but there are many good treatment options. They include:

- Long-term treatment plan - includes behaviour goals and monitoring the child's progress.
- Medication - for most children, stimulant medications are a safe and effective way to relieve ADHD symptoms.
- Behaviour therapy - this focuses on changing the child's environment to help improve behaviour.
- Parental training and education to deal with their child's ADHD behaviours in a positive way.

Tips For Parents And Teachers

Verbal instructions:

- Keep instructions brief and clear.
- Make eye contact with the child before giving important information.
- Repeat instructions.

Written work:

- Limit copying from the blackboard.
- Arrange the child to sit close to the front of the classroom.
- Find a quiet place without clutter for doing homework.

Improve self-esteem:

- Encourage the child to do things where he/she will experience success.
- Encourage and praise the child frequently.

Autism

What Is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder which affects three main areas: communication, social behaviour and imaginative play. Autism is present from birth although the features of autism only become clearer as the child gets older.

What Causes Autism?

There is no single cause to explain autism. Research shows that it is probably a biological cause resulting in abnormal function. It is also more common in families with another child with autism. A sibling of an autistic child has a 2% - 3% chance of having autism.

Autism is NOT caused by poor parenting nor the MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella) vaccine given at 15 months. There is NO proven association between MMR vaccine and autism.

How To Recognise A Child With Autism?

A child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may have one or more difficulties in:

- Socialising - difficulties relating to people, being in a 'world of their own', less responsive to physical affection, inappropriate facial expressions and behaviour (e.g. hand flapping when excited).
- Communication - difficulties in expressing what they want, repetitive or odd speech, variable speech abilities (from good expression to little or no speech, or loss of speech), difficulties in understanding gestures and poor eye contact.
- Imaginative play - play may seem repetitive and lack imagination (e.g. lining up objects and spinning wheels). Interests may be very restricted and limited (e.g. learning bus routes and timetables).

Note: All young children may have one or more of the above difficulties. It is the quality and degree of impairment which determines whether a child has autism.

How Common Is Autism?

It occurs in about one in 1,000 children with a male to female ratio of 4:1.

Assessment and Diagnosis

Diagnosis of autism usually requires a team of trained professionals which may include a developmental paediatrician or child psychiatrist, child psychologist and speech therapist, who work together in assessing the child. There is no one test for diagnosing autism, but there are several assessment tools which can be used, including parent rating scales (i.e. CARS - Child Autism Rating Scale) and observational scales. Measuring a child's speech and language skills and intellectual ability also help medical professionals to better plan treatment.

Treatment For Autism

There is no proven cure for autism but there are many good treatment options which may help to improve outcomes for children.

- Structured teaching programmes (TEAACH) have been found to positively affect learning and behaviour in autistic children.
- Other behaviour therapy programmes include sensory integration, music therapy, Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) which can also benefit autistic children.
- Medication can be useful for minimising self-injuring behaviour and managing a child's anxiety.
- Parental training and support is essential to help parents deal with autistic behaviours in a positive way. Parent support groups and linking families to community resources and programmes are essential to ensure the best possible outcomes for a child with autism.

The following resources will be useful to parents and teachers in caring for children with ADHD and autism:

ADHD

A support group for parent called SPARK (Society for the Promotion of ADHD Research and Knowledge) is available at the Institute of Mental Health's Child Guidance Clinic. More information on SPARK can be found on their website at <http://www.spark.org.sg>.

Autism

- Autism Resource Centre (ARC) website (<http://www.autism.org.sg>)
- Autism Association of Singapore (AAS) website (<http://autismlinks.org.sg>)

NUH's Child Development Unit (CDU) offers a comprehensive range of services for the assessment and treatment of children with learning and developmental disorders. A referral letter from your doctor or paediatrician to see the Child Development doctor is recommended, but walk-in appointments are also accepted.

For more information and to make an appointment, please call 6772 5502.