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Life Skills and the Autistic Child

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Abstract

Parental involvement is vital for the success of acquiring new skills for children with autism. Parents work with teachers and therapists to identify the behaviour to be changed and the life skills to be taught. Recognizing that parents are the child's earliest teachers, more programmes are beginning to train parents to continue the therapy at home. As soon as the child is diagnosed with autism, life skills instruction should begin. Valuable programmes teach early communication and social interaction skills. Parents can help their child use the skills learned at school when they are at home. Teamwork between parents and educators is essential to the child's progress. Because of the range and combination of behaviours which may be present in a child with autism, no single approach is effective with all individuals who have the disorder

Key Words: Autism, Life Skills, Teaching Strategies

Learning life skills for children with autism, parental involvement is vital for the success of acquiring new skills. Parents work with teachers and therapists to identify the behaviour to be changed and the life skills to be taught. Recognizing that parents are the child's earliest teachers, more programmes are beginning to train parents to continue the therapy at home.

As soon as the child is diagnosed with autism, life skills instruction should begin. Valuable programmes teach early communication and social interaction skills. Parents can help their child use the skills learned at school when they are at home. Teamwork between parents and educators is essential to the child's progress. Because of the range and combination of behaviours which may be present in a child with autism, no single approach is effective with all individuals who have the disorder.

“Autism continues to affect hordes of people across the globe. This is an attempt made to highlight the underpinnings of autism and the development of life skills.”

Autism is a disorder that shows unusual pattern of social and cognitive development from childhood itself, with marked differences in social interaction. Children with autism show impaired social behavior, communication activities, lack of awareness towards existence or feelings of others. They don't like to be held, avoid eye contact, prefer to play alone and have poor understanding of social conditions.

No matter what the autistic child's ability is, he will do best in future if you help him develop life skills. That should be the parents and the teacher's outlook. It should begin from the time it is identified.

Teaching life skills to an autistic child is easier said than done. You may be rushed, your child may be fighting you every step of the way, you may be too exhausted, but

teaching life skills early on is an important part of raising a child with autism. There is no standard treatment available for autism. ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) a non medical therapeutic approach has specifically shown positive results. Most behavioural treatment programmes include giving clear instructions to the child, prompting them to perform specific behaviours rewarding them to perform that behavior. There are medications to treat seizures, extreme mood swings or self injurious behavior.

Teaching Life Skills:

1. A great start is to break up the child's daily routine in a typical day. Checklist for different parts of the day can be created and the child can be made accustomed to the daily routine by checking off items on the list as the day goes on. If required a single specific task can be broken.
2. As early as possible, starting with simple self care skills, picking up toys and so forth. It is important to teach these skills longitudinally, that is across their childhood, adolescence and early childhood.
3. To focus on the most important skills like safety and hygiene. There are many other parts of daily living that requires skills and experience. So activities fostering independent living skills beyond basics should be inculcated.
4. Self help skills for children with autism thoroughly describe a systematic approach that parents and educators can use this to teach basic self care to

children, ages 24 months to early teens and even older individuals.

5. The essential abilities the autistic child needs and deserves to learn like- sensory processing i.e. making sense of the world. Babies and toddlers learn about the world around them through their senses. If these are not working properly and are not in synch, they acquire a distorted view of the world around them and also of themselves. So the parents and educators should impact upon every aspect of their lives, relationships, communication, self awareness, safety and so on.
6. Most parents and educators are familiar with how auditory and visual processing challenges can impede learning in the classroom. Yet, for many, sensory processing difficulties are a lot more complicated and far reaching. Spatial awareness is difficult for the autistic because the part of his brain that determines where his body is in space (proprioception) does not communicate with his vision. This means that when he walks he has to look at the ground because otherwise he would lose his sense of balance. So proper care should be taken in this regard.
7. Sensory processing challenges at times are experienced as a feeling of sensation in the stomach area. This is due to sensory overload in crowded, noisy areas. Setting their cell phones to ring every two hours to prompt them to use the restroom helps them to avoid embarrassing situations.

8. Many autistic adults found it difficult to tolerate social situations. Some felt, meeting a new person could be overwhelming- a different voice, a different smell and a different visual stimulus were not due to simply to communication but encompassed the total sensory processing experience. This could explain the reason as to why an autistic can learn effectively or communicate with a familiar teacher or paraprofessional but not a new one.
9. The most helpful strategy is to know in advance where they were going, who they were going to see and what was going to happen, so that the educators and parents could anticipate and prepare themselves for the sensory aspects of the day for the autistic child.
10. Other strategies include changing their diet wearing special lenses, having a sensory diet (a personalized activity schedule that provides the sensory input a person's nervous system needs to stay focused and organized), undergoing auditory and vision therapy, as well as decentralization techniques.

There is always a light at the end of the Tunnel

Nancy joined Tamana, a special school run by Dr. Shyama Chona, DPS(R K Puram), is a living example of how autistic children can cope with disability. She was 12 when she joined up, and used to suffer from frequent temper tantrums and even hit and hurt others. Her speech was limited and she was wary of large gatherings. At 25 today, she has not only conquered her fears, she participates in all activities and even helps her mother in cooking and other household activities. Although, she still does not like large gatherings, rather than getting upset over it she has learnt to cope with it.

It is startling to know that autism affects one in 150 people across the globe. This fastest growing disability has affected nearly 1.7 million people in India alone. However, a large number of cases go undetected due to lack of diagnosis. So it is the duty of the whole society at a large to work for the betterment of autistic children.

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