

Autism Awareness For Scouters

By J Carter Gibson
Pack 564
Lilburn GA
9-2-14

What is an autism spectrum disorder?

- Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a range of complex neurodevelopment disorders often characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior.
- First Diagnosed in 1940s

Typical Symptoms

- impaired ability to make friends with peers
- impaired ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
- Absence or impairment of imaginative and social play
- stereotyped, repetitive, or unusual use of language
- restricted patterns of interest that are abnormal in intensity or focus
- preoccupation with certain objects or subjects
- inflexible adherence to specific routines or rituals.

Types of ASD's

- Autistic Disorder (also called “classic” autism)
- Asperger syndrome
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)
- Rett syndrome
- Childhood disintegrative disorder

Autistic Disorder (“classic” autism)

- significant language delays
- social and communication challenges
- unusual behaviors and interests.
- Many people with autistic disorder also have delays in cognitive development.

Asperger syndrome

- Milder symptoms of autistic disorder
- Difficulties in social interaction and nonverbal communication
- Restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior or special interests
- No early delays with verbal language or cognitive development
- Often challenges with fine and gross motor skills (physical clumsiness)
- Often atypical use of language
- Average IQ

Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)

- Sometimes referred to as “atypical autism”.
- Meet some—but not all—of the criteria for autistic disorder or Asperger syndrome
- Usually recognized by age 3
- Usually have fewer and milder symptoms than those with autistic disorders
- Social and communication challenges.
- Uneven skill development (gifted in one area, delayed in another)
- Unusual likes and dislikes

Rett syndrome

- Postnatal neurodevelopmental disorder
- affects girls almost exclusively
- Characterized by normal early growth and development followed by a slowing of development
- Loss of purposeful use of the hands,
- Slowed brain and head growth,
- Problems with walking
- Seizures
- Intellectual disability

Childhood disintegrative disorder

- Loss of previously acquired language and social skills and results in a persistent delay in these areas.
- Children with this pervasive developmental disorder appear to develop normally for the first two years of life, but then lose skills in areas such as language, play, and bowel control and manifest impaired social interaction and communication associated with restrictive, repetitive, stereotyped behaviors.

What causes an autism spectrum disorder?

- Scientists aren't certain about what causes ASD, but it's likely that both genetics and environment play a role.
- Researchers have identified a number of genes associated with the disorder.
- Studies of people with ASD have found irregularities in several regions of the brain.
- Other studies suggest that people with ASD have abnormal levels of serotonin or other neurotransmitters in the brain. While these findings are intriguing, they are preliminary and require further study.
- The theory that parental practices are responsible for ASD has long been disproved.

2008 USA Statistics

- 1 in 88 children
- 1 in 54 boys
- 1 in 252 girls

Based upon this you WILL run into Autism in
Scouting

Why Scouting?

- Scouting can help create a safe community for youth with autism
- Leadership positions are an excellent way for Scouts with autism to learn tolerance and a flexibility of thinking.
- Boys with autism benefit from the self-paced nature of the Scouting advancement system
- The Scouting program offers lots of opportunities to strengthen practical skills
- Scouting places its members in a wide variety of social situations with a mixture of people and tasks

Affects on Scouting

- Insist on sameness and resist changes in routine.
- Be focused on parts of objects and not see the “big picture.”
- Be bothered by certain fabrics or clothing. May be bothered with the tags in clothing, for instance.
- Clumsiness and uncoordinated movements (may have trouble tying knots, for example).
- Have uneven development in physical and verbal abilities.
- Have a wide range of intelligence

Dangers

- Are easy targets for teasing and bullying because they don't always know how to recognize fake behavior. It is best to keep an eye out for "hazing" on the part of older boys.
- Have a high level of anxiety and a tendency to withdraw from interactions with people, places and anything else that might cause sensory overload.
- Not be sensitive to pain and need to be watched for injuries
- 1 in 4 people with autism have seizures

Questions for Parents

- What level of autism does the child have?
- What type of support will he need?
- How well can he communicate his needs verbally? Does he use sign language, pictures, or a keyboard to communicate? The Scout with autism might use a visual schedule or need visual pictures for rules.
- Does their son have behaviors associated with frustration and/or anxiety? How are these behaviors are best handled? A Scout with autism may be difficult to “read.” Parents should supply information that will help the leaders quickly get to know the Scout.

Questions for Parents

- How well does he socialize? What works best to engage the boy in activities?
- Does he have any other disabilities? If so, what does the Scout leader need to know about them?
- Does he take medication for anxiety, digestive disorders or other conditions?
- Does he need any physical help? Leaders need to know what the Scout can and cannot do on his own. How strenuous can activities be for the Scout?
- Does the youth have a school Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is available for the Scout leaders to see?
- Is he involved in other activities? If so, what are they?

How comfortable are the parents and Scout with others in the unit knowing about the disability?

- Can all leaders know?
- Can other youth in the unit know?
- How much do they feel comfortable sharing?
- If the Scout is able, it is a good idea to let him share with his fellow Scouts about autism.
- For all leaders, setting the example for other adults and the youth of the unit is very important.

Camping and Outings

- Leaders may require a parent or guardian to accompany the Scout.
- Remember that Scouts with autism may not have an appropriate sense of danger and will need to have close supervision.
- A Scout with autism may not have the communication skills necessary to seek help if he gets lost. The buddy system, which should be used with *all* Scouts, can help assure the safety of Scouts with autism.
- With the parent's permission, share the Scout's needs with other leaders and staff members at a regular summer program so that more people are aware of the potential problems.

Advancement

- Since no two Scouts with autism are the same, there are no set guidelines for advancement.
- Scouts with autism may need to communicate using pictures, sign language, or keyboards.
- They may need a parent present during Scoutmaster Conferences and Boards of Review. They may need a quieter, more structured setting for these meetings. Let the Scout know what will happen at these meetings or have rehearsals beforehand.

Tips for Leaders

- Relax! Most leadership skills used with all boys will also work well for Scouts with autism.
- Provide consistent, predictable structure. Be patient. Allow extra time for activities.
- Provide a visual schedule using words and pictures. All Scouts will find this useful. Don't put times in the schedule because a Scout with autism may expect you to follow it to the minute!
- Let the Scout know about transitions early, "In five minutes we'll be ending this activity and starting another."
- Give the Scout information about new activities ahead of time.
- Break tasks up into smaller steps.

Tips for Leaders

- Alert the Scout's parents if there is going to be an activity that may cause sensory difficulties for their son. Consider moving noisy activities outside where the noise can dissipate. If the Scout has issues with food taste and texture, carefully plan the menus around these issues so the Scout can eat the same things as other members of the unit as much as possible.
- Respect body space.
- Assign a leader to monitor closely for dangerous situations since children with autism may not have appropriate fear of danger.
- Have written rules for meetings, campouts, and outings. Scouts with autism love agendas.

Tips for Leaders

- Focus on games that develop social skills (good for all Scouts).
- Stress kindness and respect for diversity on the part of all Scouts.
- Use politically correct language and encourage others to do the same (“Scout with autism, not “autistic Scout”).
- Respect and encourage the use of any type of communication that the Scout uses.
- Utilize patrol method

Summary

- Every boy with an ASD is different and will have different strengths and weaknesses.
- Work closely with parents, they know their son best.
- Recognize and guard against dangers associated with ASDs such as ability to communicate or physical awareness.
- Be patient.