

What Autism Can Look Like

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Parent Partnership

Autism can be confused with misbehavior. Here are three autism behaviors to look out for and tips on how to respond to them.

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While more information than ever is available about autism, there are still prevalent stereotypes: The “Rain Man” stereotype of the severely impacted person with savant skills, and the less severely impacted “Bill Gates” stereotype, a scientifically or mathematically brilliant person with limited social skills.

Stereotypes, by definition, are oversimplifications, which means that many layers and nuances are frequently missed.

Autism expert Dr. Stephen Shore, who is on the autism spectrum himself, says, “Once you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” In other words, the elements that make up autism can be and are differently combined in every person on the spectrum. Here’s a great video that demonstrates what this means:

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My son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum in first grade. He's now in sixth grade, and we have worked with his school over the years to support him and his teachers in understanding what autism can look like in him.

Most students with autism will exhibit behaviors that don't look like autism stereotypes and, instead, might look like misbehavior. But they are still autism behaviors. Below are kinds of behaviors which our son experienced in his classrooms and how we worked with his teachers to manage them.

Intermittent Mutism

When my son experiences strong emotions, good or bad, the speech center of his brain stops working for a short time while it processes the emotion. If someone asks him a question during this moment, he will be unable to answer verbally. This can be a common occurrence in people on the autism spectrum. It doesn't mean that they're not paying attention or are being defiant, disrespectful, or uncooperative. For my son, it simply means that his brain needs more time to process a response.

Other communication avenues are usually still available to him. He is still able to make gestures, nod, and shake his head. He can still write and draw. So to help give him time, the easiest thing for us is to simply wait the few seconds it takes for his speech center to kick back in. One method we use is the eight-second rule:

As each child's response may be different, the best thing a teacher can do is talk with the child's special education teacher and speech therapist to know how to best respond when this occurs.

Repetitive Body Movements

A very common hallmark of autism is "stimming," a repetitive body movement like kicking a leg or twirling one's hair. (Stimming can also be found in children without autism—here's more information on [different kinds of stimming](#).)

A child might use stimming for different reasons. Some children, like my son, use it as a calming strategy, often in response to sensory overload—bright lights, lots of movement, lots of sound, strange or intense smells, students brushing up against him in line.

Other children will stim as a means of increasing stimulus. This can be seen during quiet times in the classroom when a child is expected to sit still and listen. In this case the stim is used to stimulate the nervous system.

Stimming doesn't mean that a student is bored or doesn't want to be there. It isn't an attention-getting device or a way to disrupt the lesson. His nervous system is driving the behavior—it's not voluntary and is not always something he can control.

My son's special education teacher used the phrase "unexpected behavior" as a code to help him to remember to manage his stims. When his stim might disturb students, our son's IEP allowed that he could leave the classroom and go to a quiet space until he was ready to return.

One thing a teacher should never do is draw negative attention to a stim or try to publicly pressure or shame a student into stopping. This can increase anxiety and make the stimming worse. Trying to stop the stim outright can result in traumatic meltdowns.

Task Avoidance

Sometimes my son refuses to do classwork. Ninety-five percent of the time it's not because he's being defiant or intransigent, or "simply doesn't want to do it"—it is because something else is going on. Understanding the underlying source of the behavior can be tricky and is often the cause of frustration for both teacher and student.

Once my son suddenly refused to read an assigned book in class. After doing some digging, we discovered that the action in the story—the death of a parent and the subsequent resorting to thievery by the young protagonist—upset him so much that he was unable to focus on the reading. Our solution was to have the teacher give us summaries of upcoming reading to prepare him for story twists and emotional issues so that he would not be surprised and would be better prepared for the emotional intensity.

Another time he completely stopped paying attention in his social studies class. After several weeks of struggling to get him to go to the class, we sat him down and talked about how he felt about going to the new classroom. By that time, he had processed and was able to describe what was bothering him. He told us that the classroom “smelled like stinky feet.” He was unable to focus with this overwhelming sensory input. We were able to work out a solution for him to stay in his home classroom for social studies.

Keys for Understanding Children With Autism

The takeaways from these examples can be applied with all children on the autism spectrum:

1. Start with the assumption that the child wants to do his or her best.
2. If rewards and consequences are not working as a first approach, a teacher should look to understand and eliminate the cause of the behavior.
3. Be patient and creative in determining the cause.
4. Be patient and creative in finding a solution that meets both the child’s needs and those of the teacher.

The most important recommendation is to work closely and collaboratively with the child’s special education team and use the same techniques, strategies, and tools in the general education setting that are being used with the student in the special education setting. Our son responded well and quickly with consistent use of the same strategies by all of his teachers, both general education and special education.

About the Author

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