Cynthia Burggraf Torppa, Ph.D., Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, Morrow County, Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University

Turn on the television and you’ll soon discover that every news program, both local and national, has a health reporter to keep us informed about the latest medical findings and treatments. While these stories are an important and helpful service, the findings they report can sometimes trigger doubts and fears about our health. This may be especially true for parents’ fears about their children’s health.

Stories about autism and related disorders have become more common as studies have documented the increasing incidence of serious neurological disorders in children. Moreover, this rise in incidence is not the result of increased diagnosis or reporting. Recent studies have shown that the number of children with autism has risen tenfold within the last decade. Other sources suggest that approximately 1 in 500 children have Asperger’s Syndrome, and another 1% of the children in the United States suffer from Nonverbal Learning Disorder. Statistics like these are enough to frighten any parent!

What Are Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder?

Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder are all neurological disorders, which means they are dysfunctions in the way that the brain processes information. Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome are both classified as Pervasive Developmental Disorders. This means that children’s behavior is characterized by severe and pervasive impairments in social interaction skills, communication skills, and by stereotyped behavior, interests, and activities. Nonverbal Learning Disorder shares many of the same characteristics, but generally to a lesser degree of severity. It is important for parents to keep in mind, however, that a related and much less severe type of problem, dysemia, shares many characteristics in common with these more serious disorders.

Autism

Autism is the most serious of these disorders. Autism develops within the first 2½ years of life, and is often seen as early as 4 months. Boys are affected by autism much more often than are girls.

At its most basic, it can be defined as an extreme inability to communicate with or respond to others. It is called a “spectrum disorder” because various symptoms and characteristics may be exhibited in a wide range of combinations and degrees of severity. Children with autism:

- seldom make eye contact or show appropriate facial expressions, body postures, and gestures, and they usually do not talk, or in other ways attempt to participate in conversations;
- lack interest in the things and events around them;
- tend to repeat actions (for example, finger flapping or twisting); and
- have limited interests.

Asperger’s Syndrome

Like autistic children, children with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) are unable to create and maintain social relationships. They are likely to develop repetitive actions and have extremely limited interests and activities (for ex-
ample, an interest in dinosaurs that develops into an obsession). Asperger’s Syndrome differs from autism in that AS children:
• acquire language at a normal or even accelerated rate in infancy and childhood;
• exhibit rigidity in their thinking that may become problematic;
• are often clumsy;
• may do well at visual spatial tasks (such as drawing or identifying which part in a picture is missing);
• may do well at visual motor tasks (such as puzzles or mazes); and
• are unable to produce written work.

Nonverbal Learning Disorder
Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD) is not a recognized psychological diagnosis. It is, however, a term that is being used by many psychologists to describe children with difficulties that are similar to, yet unique from, autism and Asperger’s Syndrome. Like children with autism and Asperger’s Syndrome, children with NLD have difficulty making friends and have difficulty understanding nonverbal signals in social situations. They tend to learn language at a normal pace, but may have trouble using it appropriately in social situations. They also have difficulty with mathematics and learning from experience. There is no difference in the number of girls and boys who develop this disorder.

What Do Parents with Concerns Need to Know about Getting Professional Help for Their Children?

First, studies suggest that children with these neurological disorders may be helped a great deal, and the earlier the help begins the better. If you notice that your child is having difficulty talking with, playing with, and responding appropriately to others, he or she might benefit from professional help.

Second, if you are concerned that your child needs professional help, don’t panic and don’t wait. Simply take your child to your pediatrician and/or a clinical psychologist as soon as possible for an evaluation. And remember, even though most children begin to use simple words by 15 months and simple phrases by 24 months, development psychologists report that failure to talk before age 3 is not necessarily a sign of a serious neurological disorder. In addition, some children exhibit poor relationship skills simply due to a lack of opportunity to learn more appropriate skills. These children will improve dramatically with a little extra training.

Third, if your child is having difficulty, be sure to get a thorough evaluation by a skilled expert. As can be seen in the descriptions above, the behaviors that characterize these disorders are so similar that it may difficult to tell one from another. Yet a correct assessment is critical to designing an appropriate intervention program for your child.

What Can You Do to Help Others with a Child with Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, or Nonverbal Learning Disability?

One of the best things you can do to support families is to understand a little about these disorders. In addition, you will be doing a great service to the family, as well as to the child with autism, AS, or NLD if you help others (especially children) understand why a child behaves as he or she does, or what types of behaviors to expect from a child with one of these disorders.

To learn about these disorders, go to the library and ask to borrow one or more of the wonderful books on these topics that are written for parents and nonprofessional audiences. Helpful books about autism include: Catherine Maurice’s Let Me Hear Your Voice: A Family’s Triumph Over Autism (Fawcett Books, 1994) and Sandra Harris’ and Mary Jane Weiss’ Right From the Start: Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism (Woodbine, 2003.) Some books about Nonverbal Learning Disorder and Asperger’s Syndrome include: Katheryn Stewart’s Helping a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder or Asperger’s Syndrome (New Harbinger, 2002) and Rondalyn Whitney’s Bridging the Gap: Raising a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder (Perigee, 2002).

References