

Autism and the Consultation Process in India

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Introduction

Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by three core features that demonstrate problems with speech and language, social relatedness and behavior patterns. It has a prevalence rate of 2 to 6 children per 1000 children in India. It is more common in boys than in girls and is usually detected by 3 years of age although in some cases it might take longer. The exact cause is still not known but some recent studies have shown that genetic and environmental factors can both contribute towards the development of autism. Treatment is aimed towards helping the child gain mastery of certain social, emotional and cognitive skills that will ensure smoother integration with schools and society. If you suspect that something may not be quite right with your child's developmental progress it is advisable to intervene at the earliest. Beginning with the consultation process and further referrals this article will hopefully make the process seem less daunting for all parents who are contemplating a visit to a mental health professional.

Seeking Consultation and Assessment Part 1

The first course of action would be to seek consultation with a trained mental health professional (usually a child psychiatrist or clinical psychologist) who will undertake a core assessment involving questions associated with your child's current problems and its development.

What to expect?

A detailed description of your child's current level of functioning and developmental history will be recorded following which the professional will initiate a discussion about what the symptoms could possibly mean and the probability of it being a developmental disorder.

However, at this stage, the professional is most likely to recommend undergoing further assessments (or tests) for arriving at a confirmed diagnosis.

Medication may or may not be prescribed. The suitability of it varies from case to case and a medical professional would be the best judge of it [1].

Assessment Part 2

Following an initial consultation with the professional, you may be required to undergo further assessments (as mentioned above) for arriving at a diagnosis.

What to expect?

Tests that contain questions pertaining to your child's cognitive, social, motor and emotional functioning for determining the presence and severity of autism. Identification of sensory issues is also a crucial part of this step.

In some cases, the process of diagnosis may not be as smooth or straightforward as expected. It may take several professionals to formulate a comprehensive overview of your child's case and arrive at a confirmed diagnosis.

In some cases, the symptoms are given priority over a diagnosis. Even if a diagnosis is not possible right at the start your child will be in good hands and will possibly be referred for therapy based on the

current symptoms and in due course will receive a confirmed diagnosis [2].

Intervention Planning and Management

After identifying the areas of functioning that your child needs help with he/she may be referred to different professionals specializing in different forms of therapy.

What to expect?

- Consultations with speech therapists, occupational therapists, play therapists, behavioral therapists.
- Regular parent training sessions.
- Explanation of treatment goals and methods. In most cases, all professionals dealing with your child will provide you with a comprehensive review of your child's progress either on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis.
- You may also be given a few activities to practice at home with your child which will equip him/her with certain social, emotional, behavioral and language skills.

Intervention Time-Frame

Different interventions require different amounts of time and will depend on several factors such as the child's readiness to engage, family dynamics, issues to address, time availability and other practical factors. Whatever be the case, therapy is a well thought-out procedure that will require patience, time and effort for you to observe any noticeable change. Each therapy session usually lasts somewhere between 30 to 45 minutes twice or thrice per week and may continue for several weeks and even months. It is preferable to have realistic goals and expectations and within a realistic time frame [3].

Conclusion

During the treatment/intervention phase, all the professionals involved will keep you updated about your child's progress. During this time you can discuss any additional problems that you might be facing at home with your child and which you feel needs to be addressed during therapy.

Once again, please remember to have realistic goals and expectations and most importantly create a fun, supportive, caring and empathetic

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environment at home. Unconditional love and understanding will go a long way in helping you and your child lead a stress-free life.

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