Autism Lifespan Impact

Background

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that usually begins early on in development. It can affect individuals at varying degrees along the spectrum. It is one of the most common disorders, and about 1 in 59 children in the United States are affected by it (Salk Institute, 2019). In addition, more boys are affected by the disorder than girls. It affects nearly 1 in every 37 boys and around 1 in every 151 girls, meaning that boys are affected about 4 times more than girls are (Autism Facts and Figures, 2019). There is no single underlying factor that causes the disorder, but early awareness and intervention can help minimize its affects. “Some of the behaviors associated with autism include delayed learning of language; difficulty making eye contact or holding a conversation; difficulty with executive functioning, which relates to reasoning and planning; narrow, intense interests; poor motor skills’ and sensory sensitivities” (“What is Autism?”, 2016). Individuals can experience one or multiple of these issues. If a child starts displaying one or more of these complications, then intervention is the best action to take. Intervention can minimize the effects of the disorder and help the individual function better in society.

Infancy/Early Childhood

Parents can usually see the signs of autism in the first few years of their child. Autism spectrum disorder usually starts taking place within the first two years of life. It can be hard to notice until around age three to four. Due to the importance of early intervention, new brain imaging has been, and is still being created to detect the disorder early on. It can now be detected as early as 6 months into an infant’s life (Shen & Piven, 2017). There is still little science that points to what degree of the disorder an individual may have if they start displaying symptoms of autism, but studies have showed that early intervention can help reduce the issues caused by the disorder in every stage (Shen & Piven, 2017). In addition, new technology and science is being created to try to detect autism as quickly as possible, and minimize the effects it has on individuals. It is hard to formally detect autism early, however as there is no actual test for detecting it, other than allowing your child to undergo brain imaging. One reoccurring factor in research points to an increased brain size at a young age. This may be an early indicator of autism through better brain imaging (Shen & Piven 2017). As research continues it may become easier to discover the disorder in children at a younger age and therefore give more help to them.

Children with autism may develop at a different rate than those with normal development. The use of language might be delayed and may not develop as fast in children with the disorder. Further, children with autism struggle to make eye contact compared to children with normal development. This may be an early indicator of the disorder in young children (“How autism spectrum…”, 2018). This may make it hard to teach the same skills to a child at a young age as other without the disorder. The child may have a harder time making eye contact and focusing on an adult to learn from and a harder time drawing connections from the things they may be trying to teach (“How autism spectrum…”, 2018). This makes it harder for children with autism to develop and if not given extra attention, may hinder them later in life.

Middle Childhood/Adolescence

One of the biggest developmental issues in those suffering from autistic spectrum disorder is their ability to socialize. This becomes a bigger factor when they get into middle childhood and get into elementary school. Many times it is harder for these individuals to interact with their fellow students compared to those children with normal development (Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development, 2005). This may make it harder in general for the child to develop communication and interaction skills. This is why early intervention is beneficial so that the child can try developing these skills early on and be able to utilize them in a school environment. The later parents wait to intervene the further delayed the child's development will be and the harder it will be for that individual to interact in the future.

Teens going through adolescence and beginning high school may need more involvement from parents and their school, than normal developing individuals. Those with ASD may not understand puberty and sexual development as well as those that develop normally. It is usually beneficial for the parents to inform those with the disorder earlier than normal children. This will help them know what to expect and give them a longer duration to fully grasp the changes that they are going through (Sarris, 2013). Further, school systems should also be more informative and helpful to those with the disorder during these years to help guide them. During this time the individual may need help with personal hygiene and new needs such as shaving (Sarris, 2013). This will all be new to the child and they may not understand the changes that are occurring. If a child is left alone to face these by themselves it may divide them even farther from their peers.

To continue, just like normal teens, those with the disorder may go through the same rebellious stage and have the same want for independence as those with normal development. Parents are still encouraged to stay more involved in their lives, while trying to give them a little more independence. It is vital that there continues to be a good connection between parents and the individual, as well as a good connection with the school system to make sure the individual stays on course and continues to develop as well as possible. Individuals during this time may face the obstacles of changing routines and more executive functioning, which is difficult for those with ASD. Executive functions help individuals keep track of time, interact and relate with others, and relate past experiences to the experiences that one is going through at that point (Sarris, 2013). This makes this time period extremely difficult for both the individual and parents. Constant contact and a good relationship between the two will help transition during this time period. Those that are lower on the spectrum may also attempt to have romantic relations during this period. This is often a new experience for them and may be difficult for parents to adjust and help with (Sarris, 2013). Parents should take an active role in their child's romantic life in teaching them safe sexual practices and keeping them informed as much as they possibly can, even if that includes outside involvement.

Early/Middle Adulthood

The transition from high school to the adult world can be very difficult for those that have ASD. Whether they try to gain independence and get involved in the working community or challenge themselves by going to secondary education, the change can be a shock. This is where differing degrees of ASD may become more apparent and cause more problems. Those with higher degrees of ASD may not be able to live on their own or may not be able to drive or work

the same jobs as those with lesser levels. This creates a differing degree of difficulties along the spectrum, but at any level it can be stressful and a big change to deal with. Those with lower functioning skills that cannot develop self-help skills many times may move into group homes or individual housing with caregivers to help them live a meaningful life, or may continue to live with family members. Those with higher functioning skills, may seek group living or may try to live on their own with minimal help from others. They may also try to acquire secondary education or more advanced jobs to work at and contribute to the community (Reynolds & Dombeck, 2019). The fact that the disorder is on a far spectrum it is hard to tell the outcome for individuals and is more on a person to person basis. Some are able to find a partner and get married and live the same as those without the disorders, while others may be limited to always needing others to help take care of them. The amount of intervention and help that individuals get at a young age usually helps the state they are in when they reach adulthood.

Later Life

As those with ASD get older and perhaps retire, it is important that they keep in touch with individuals that can assist them and have a good base of support around themselves. It is important for these individuals, just like others that they stay active and healthy during their later years. Just like other aging adults, other conditions may develop in their later years that may be better noticed by others than themselves. It is important that they notice and get treatment for any other issues they may encounter in later life (The National Autistic Society, 2018). They may also need aides or go into alternative living to make sure that they get the support they need in their later life. It is good to have a plan already set up for later life for individuals with ASD. This may mean talking to family and getting assistance from them or seeking outside support during their later years of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the lifespan development of individuals with ASD are often different from those with normal development. The degree of the difference often time relies on where on the spectrum the individual is and how much intervention took place at a young age for the individual. The earlier and more assistance an individual with ASD gets the less the disorder will affect them in later life. Most stages of development are the same for individuals suffering from ASD, but many time the transitions between stages are harder on them. It is important that they have a good support system and have internal and external support systems to help them through the different stages of their lives.

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