

Autism: Your Piece of the Autism Puzzle

Objective

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States. Individuals with Autism have a seven times greater chance of having an encounter with a first responder. The prevalence of Autism is increasing each year and from 1992 to 2008 the Autism diagnosis rate has increased nearly 1800 percent.

Autism is a condition we almost always refer to as affecting only children, cut off from human contact, never autistic adults. As if such children with Autism never grow up and reach adulthood. Statistics show that in the next ten years over 1/2 million children with Autism will reach adulthood. The higher functioning children will seek greater independence from their caretakers and will be out in society interacting with others.

As first responders, we have a responsibility to the communities that we serve, to understand this growing population and learn how to respond to them. Unfortunately there is no magic bullet that makes one type of response best for all first responders. Each autistic person is uniquely different and what may work in one situation may not work in another. Individuals with Autism are like fingerprints, they are all distinctly different.

However, if first responders can understand the basic behaviors common to those on the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), we are much more likely to have a safe interaction with them on the street. Ultimately this is the main objective for my teachings; safety for the individual with autism and safety for the first responder.

What is Autism

Autism is a brain disorder where the neural pathways of the brain are impaired. This brain disorder results in the inability of the brain to process information properly and efficiently. The brain is divided into different regions all communicating with one another via these neural pathways. With those that have autism, the transfer of information between each region of the brain and throughout the body is impaired. Imagine the neural pathways acting like huge extension cords in the brain. Now imagine if these extension cords are cut or somehow incomplete. Like a water hose with a kink in the line somewhere. Where there is a kink in the extension cord or hose, the brain is not getting all the information it needs to communicate with itself. Because these neural pathways are impaired, there is a distinct abnormality in the brain. This poor communication between the different regions of the brain results in an uneven skill level. People with autism are often very good at one thing and not good at something else. Those that have autism are usually very detail oriented and often lack the ability to think in general concepts. They get distracted with the minor details that most of us don't get bogged down with. Those with autism are generally deficient in speech, language and social skills.

Causes of Autism

In the 1980's, the prevalence of autism was ten cases per every 10,000 in population. Today the diagnosis rate is one case per 110 births. What is causing this increase? Although most cases of autism are considered idiopathic (without a known cause) most researchers believe there is a genetic susceptibility. Research also points to an exposure to a toxic agent as being a possible cause.

If we go back to the 1980's and compare the difference in our daily exposure to toxic agents then, to our current exposure to toxic agents, the difference is alarming. Although there is no confirmed link to a specific toxic agent and autism, we have global warming, pollution, an increase in prescription medication, the leaching of chemicals into our drinking water, vaccinations and medications used in our daily food products (cattle, chicken, hogs etc), exposure to radiation, pesticides, and chemicals used to treat our lawns and crops used for food. This is only a small example of some of the toxic agents we have a greater exposure to today. The truth is there are so many more toxic agents in our world today than even 20 and 30 years ago.

What research has indicated is that not only is there a genetic component to autism and a greater chance of exposure to a chemical agent, the timing during development that exposure to a toxic agent occurs is also key. When the child/fetus is exposed to a toxic agent at one stage of development there could be no effect on the outcome of development, but exposure to a toxic agent during a crucial stage of development could have detrimental effects (which could lead to autism).

There is no single autism gene used to diagnose autism. Diagnosing autism is not like diagnosing a chromosomal defect like down syndrome or fragile X. There is no physical identifiable feature we can identify autism with, which makes it difficult for not only first responders to identify, it makes it more difficult for anyone to identify. It is also referred to an "invisible disability." Diagnosing autism in children is done by watching a child's behavior. When a pediatric neurologist diagnoses a child with autism, they refer to the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders). Doing this is nothing more than profiling the child's behavior.

Behaviors Associated with Autism

1. May not respond to a uniform, badge or other emergency response symbols. Social encounters with the police is not understood because it is often something that is not taught to them. Those with autism will not pick up on what is appropriate behavior in front of a first responder.
2. Many will avoid eye contact. Eye contact can be a huge distraction for those with ASD. Many will not be able to listen to you and look at you at the same time, it is too distracting.
3. May make repetitive motions or sounds. Many "stim" or self-soothe. They may flap their hands or wrists. They may walk on their toes. This is their way of attempting to manage their body. Unless the person is self-injurious or damaging property, please do not attempt to stop their behavior.

4. May become upset when touched. A person with ASD has heightened senses. They do not perceive the senses like you and I. Touch is a sense and many are over-sensitized to touch. Avoid touching them if at all possible. If you have to touch them, explain in simple terms what you are going to do and why.
5. They may not provide ID when asked. Be patient and speak slowly. Keep your questions simple and consider repeating and rephrasing your questions. 50% of the autistic population are non-verbal or have limited speech.
6. Lack of awareness of danger. Most people avoid danger and recognize it when placed in a dangerous situation. Many with ASD will not recognize danger and will not move away from it. Be aware they may run away without warning.
7. Continues to do something after being told to stop. Demonstrate non-threatening gestures you want them to mimic.
8. Appear to be under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Their actions appear odd or inappropriate. When asked about taking drugs they may admit to having taken drugs. Avoid making assumptions about drugs or alcohol use.
9. Become self-injurious. Under stress the person may become self-injurious. Use the least invasive technique to ensure their safety.
10. Become aggressive. Restraints should only be used as a last resort. Consider positional asphyxia and be certain to monitor breathing. Turn them on their side, if in the prone position.

Characteristics of Autism

- Not recognize a first responders vehicle, badge or uniform
- Not understand what is expected of them
- Not respond to commands
- Run or move away when approached
- May only repeat what is said to them
- May say “no” or “yes” to all questions
- Have difficulty judging personal space
- May try to avoid sensory input due to hypersensitivity
- Have a decreased cognitive ability when experiencing heightened anxiety or frustration
- May become agitated resulting in a fight or flight response
- May have an associated medical condition along with their autism
- May become fixated on a particular topic or object
- Speak in a monotone voice with unusual voice inflections

- May give misleading statements or confessions
- May not acknowledge physical pain or trauma

Recommendations for First Responders

1. Make sure the person is unarmed and maintain a safe distance. Officer safety is paramount.
2. Talk softly and calmly. Speak in direct short phrases. Never use slang. Allow for delayed responses and consider repeating and rephrasing questions.
3. Consider the use of pictures or written phrases. Many are much better at written language, especially when stressed.
4. Use calming body language. Try not to startle them. Consider taking them away from the scene or the scene away from them. A large number of first responders will produce a greater amount of anxiety. Have only one officer/medic talk with the person. Turn your police/fire radios down.
5. Do not interpret their failure to respond as a lack of cooperation or an increase use of force.
6. Always seek assistance from parents or caretakers.
7. Avoid stopping their repetitive behavior unless it is a danger to themselves or others or it interferes with your assessment. Evaluate them for injury.
8. Be aware that their senses will be heightened and they may be on medication.
9. Move as slowly as the conditions allow. Talk them through transitions and tell them what will happen next.
10. If you are not able to communicate with them, do not assume they do not understand you.
11. If you have to restrain or arrest them, avoid positional asphyxia and monitor their breathing. Alert jail authorities and consider requesting an isolated room.
12. If a report is necessary, document autism in the report. This will assist in prosecution.
13. Avoid touching them. If you are treating them, be mindful of their tactile sensations. They may not like the use of adhesive tapes, cardiac monitors or pulse oximeters.
14. If it is a fire or rescue call, you may have to force entry due to the locks on doors and windows. Expect that they may hide and have not received basic fire education.

Resources Available for First Responders

1. Take Me Home Program. This is a county wide alert system available to every police department in Summit County. People eligible for the Take Me Home program will have difficulty communicating basic information to a first responder. A person's profile in this program includes their name, emergency contact information and a photo of the individual. This program is very beneficial to those with Autism who may wander away from home.
2. A Child is Missing: This is a free program to law enforcement nationwide. It is used for both children and adults with autism who have wandered away from home. When any law

enforcement agency is unable to recover a missing person with autism, A Child is Missing will send out a reverse 911 to all those who live in a certain geographical area the person is missing from. This program allows citizens who live near a person with autism to know the police are actively looking for a missing person. 1-888-875-2246

3. Anytime a first responder needs assistance with a person with autism and has an emergency, you can always contact the Summit County Developmental Disabilities Board at their after hours emergency number(1-877-271-6733). They have a number of resources they can use to assist in an emergency encounter and can assist both night and day.

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