

LESSON ONE

Autism Recognition and Response: Understanding Autism

DOMAIN: COGNITIVE

LEVEL OF LEARNING: COMPREHENSION

MATERIALS

Overhead projector; chalkboard or flip chart; Autism & Law Enforcement: Roll Call Briefing video, Debbaudt/Legacy Productions, 2004; Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals, Dennis Debbaudt; Dangerous Encounters - Avoiding Perilous Situations with Autism, Bill Davis and Wendy Goldband Schunick; Dealing with Unique Challenges Such as Autism, Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services, Virginia Department of Health; Autism Myths and Realities, Robert Needleman, M.D.; www.drspock.com; Kyle Westphale Foundation (www.kylestreehouse.org); Autism and PDD Support Network (www.autism-pdd.net); Why Does Chris Do That? Some Suggestions Regarding the Cause and Management of the Unusual Behavior of Children and Adults with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome, by Tony Attwood, Revised 2003 edition, Autism Society of North Carolina (www.autismsociety-nc.org); Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org).

TERMINAL OBJECTIVE

The emergency responder shall correctly identify the behavioral symptoms and characteristics of a child or adult with autism.

ENABLING OBJECTIVES

1. The emergency responder shall correctly identify in writing, the definition of autism and how it may affect an individual.
2. The emergency responder shall correctly identify in writing, the behavioral symptoms and characteristics of a child or adult with autism.

LESSON ONE

Autism Recognition and Response:

Understanding Autism

MOTIVATION

Autism is the fastest-growing disability in the United States. Currently, more than 1.5 million children and adults in this country have been diagnosed with autism or another form of Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), and the diagnosis rate is rising 10-17% each year. In North Carolina alone, nearly 50,000 people are living with Autism. With this, the likelihood of encountering an individual with autism during an emergency situation increases exponentially.

It is imperative that emergency responders learn to recognize the “classic” signs of autism, so that the proper response techniques can be used to ensure the responder's safety as well as the safety of the individual with autism.

PRESENTATION

ENABLING OBJECTIVE #1

The emergency responder shall correctly identify in writing, the definition of autism and how it may affect an individual.

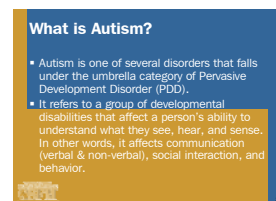
1. Point out that autism is one of several disorders that fall under the umbrella category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD).
2. List and explain similar terms used with Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD).
 - a) Autism Spectrum Disorder.
 - b) Asperger's Syndrome.
 - c) High Functioning Autism.
 - d) Low Functioning Autism.



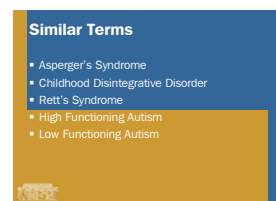
OHT 01



OHT 02



OHT 03

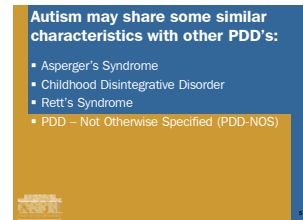


OHT 04

3. Explain that autism is a complex developmental brain disorder that begins in early childhood and persists throughout adulthood.
4. Explain that autism generally affects three crucial areas of development.
 - a) Verbal and non-verbal communication.
 - b) Social interaction.
 - c) Creative or imaginative play is affected.
5. Point out that autism may share some similar characteristics with other PDDs.
 - a) Asperger's Syndrome.
 - b) Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.
 - c) Rett's Syndrome.
 - d) PDD - Not Otherwise Specified.

NOTE: More information about PDDs can be found at the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities website.

6. Point out that males are four times more likely than females to be diagnosed with autism.
7. Discuss that all individuals with autism experience developmental delays which can present themselves in various ways.
 - a) Language development.
 - b) Self-help skills such as dressing, toilet training, and brushing teeth.
 - c) Academics.
 - d) Injurious behavior to self or others.
8. Point out that, at this time, there is no known single cause for autism, but it is generally accepted to be caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function.
 - a) Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in autistic versus non-autistic children.
 - b) Researchers are investigating a number of theories, including the link between heredity, genetics, and medical problems.
9. Identify the most prevalent misconceptions about autism.



OHT 05

- a) Cold or distant parenting causes autism. It was once thought that parents who were unloving created such an unattractive world to the child that the child became autistic. This theory couldn't be farther from the truth and is no longer considered credible. Children from all walks of life are diagnosed with autism, and parents with autistic children also have children who are not autistic. Today we know that parents are not to blame for causing autism.
- b) All autistic people are like the character portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the movie Rain Man. Because that character had autism and exhibited extraordinary abilities sometimes found in individuals with autism (known as splinter skills, which can include perfect memory, mathematical calculation, and art/music), it is believed that all autistic people have abilities like these.
- c) Autistic children never learn to talk. Many autistics have the ability to speak and learn to talk and communicate successfully with others.
- d) People with autism do not smile or show affection. People with autism do indeed feel and emotion. Because of the nature of the disorder, it may take longer for attachments and bonds to form, but many autistic children show affection right from the beginning, and many others demonstrate affection as they develop.

Reference: Autism Myths and Realities, Robert Needleman, M.D; Autism Society of America (autism-society.org).

PRESENTATION

ENABLING OBJECTIVE #2

The emergency responder shall correctly identify in writing, the behavioral symptoms and characteristics of a child or adult with autism.

1. Explain that every person with autism is an individual and has a unique personality and combination of characteristics.
2. Explain that autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that, although it is defined by a certain set of behaviors,

Misconceptions about Autism

- Cold or distant parenting causes autism.
 - Children from all walks of life are diagnosed with autism, and parents with autistic children also have children who are not autistic.

OHT 06

Misconceptions about Autism

- All autistic people are like the character portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the movie "Rain Man".
 - Because the character had autism and exhibited extraordinary abilities sometimes found in individuals with autism, it is believed that all autistic people have abilities like these.

OHT 07

Misconceptions about Autism

- Autistic children never learn to talk.
 - Many autistics have the ability to speak and can talk and communicate successfully with others.

OHT 08

Misconceptions about Autism

- People with autism do not smile or show affection.
 - People with autism do indeed feel and experience emotion. Because of the nature of this disorder, it may take longer for attachments and bonds to form, but many autistic children show affection right from the beginning, and many others demonstrate affection as they develop.

OHT 09

the symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations and severity.

NOTE: This is a crucial point to emphasize when teaching emergency responders to recognize autism behavioral symptoms. No two autistic individuals will act completely the same or display the same characteristics and capabilities.

3. Point out that people with autism process information in unique ways.
 - a) Because their processes are different from our own, they respond to their environment in unpredictable and widely differing ways.
 - b) In some cases, aggressive and/or self-injurious behavior may result.
4. Explain that sensory integration is defined as the interaction of two or more sensory processes in a manner that enhances the adaptiveness of the brain.
 - a) Each sense works with the others to form a composite picture of who we are physically, where we are, and what is going on around us.
 - b) Sensory integration is the critical function of the brain that is responsible for producing this composite picture.
 - c) It is the organization of sensory information for on-going use.
5. Point out that for most of us, effective sensory integration occurs automatically, unconsciously, and without effort.
6. Point out that sensory integration problems are common in individuals with autism. Their information processing is inefficient, demanding effort and attention with no guarantee of accuracy.
7. Explain that these integration problems in an autistic individual result in one or more of the senses being either hypersensitive or hyposensitive.
8. Discuss the possibility that an autistic individual's unusual sensory processes may result in unpredictable responses to their environment.

Spectrum Disorder

- Defined as a certain set of behaviors
- Symptoms and characteristics can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations and severity

OHT 10

Behavioral Indicators

- Does not speak or has unusual verbal expression
- Says things out of context or recites conditioned responses
- Body language may appear stilted
- Facial expressions may be flat or appear disinterested
- Provides little or no eye contact

OHT 11

People with autism process information in unique ways

- Their processes are different from our own, therefore they respond to their environment in unpredictable and widely differing ways.
- In some cases, autistic individuals may engage in aggressive and/or self-injurious behavior.

OHT 12

Sensory Integration

- Sensory integration is defined as the interaction of two or more sensory processes in a manner that enhances the adaptiveness of the brain.
- Each sense works with the other to form a composite picture of who we are physically, where we are, and what is going on around us.

OHT 13

Sensory Integration

- Sensory integration problems are common in autistic individuals.
- Their process is inefficient, demanding great effort and attention with no guarantee of accuracy.
- Sensory integration problems result in one or more of the senses being overly sensitive (hypersensitive) or under sensitive (hyposensitive).

OHT 14

Sensory Integration


- Due to the person's unusual sensory processes, unpredictable responses during an emergency situation may occur.
- The flashing lights and/or sirens on a fire truck or ambulance could be upsetting (hypersensitivity).
- - The person may continuously rock back and forth, or rub/scratch their skin. (hyposensitivity).

OHT 15

9. Point out that some individuals with autism are particularly hypersensitive to sound, finding even the most ordinary daily noises painful, while others may be extremely sensitive to light.
10. Discuss the implications of these hypersensitivities in regards to the emergency responder's use of flashing lights and sirens.
11. Explain that some individuals with autism will engage in self-stimulating behaviors in order to provide needed sensory stimulation.
12. Point out that there are two theories suggesting why an autistic person engages in self-stimulating behaviors.
 - a) Self-stimulating behavior provide the hyposensitive autistic person with sensory stimulation he or she feels is lacking.
 - b) It calms the hypersensitive autistic person when the environment is too stimulating and the person is in a state of sensory-overload. The behaviors are used to help block out the over-stimulating environment and focus his or her attention inward.
13. Discuss that the single most defining self-stimulating behavior of an individual with autism is repetitious, self-stimulating behavior.
 - a) Repetitive body movements or repetitive movement of objects.
14. Identify several self-stimulating or stereotypic behaviors that an autistic individual may engage in.
 - a) Staring at lights or off into space for long periods of time.
 - b) Repetitive blinking.
 - c) Moving fingers in front of the eyes.
 - d) Hand-flapping or snapping fingers.
 - e) Tapping ears.
 - f) Making vocal sounds.
 - g) Rubbing the skin with one's own hands or another object or constant scratching.
 - h) Rocking the entire body front to back or side to side.
 - i) Placing body parts or objects in one's mouth.
 - j) Licking or smelling objects.

Self-Stimulating Behaviors


- Some individuals with autism will engage in self-stimulating behaviors in order to provide needed sensory stimulation.



OHT 16

Self-Stimulating Behaviors


- Two theories behind why autistic individuals perform self-stimulating behaviors are:
 - To provide the hyposensitive person with the sensory stimulation he or she feels is lacking.
 - To calm the hypersensitive person when the environment is too stimulating and the person is in a state of sensory-overload (i.e., the behaviors are used to block out the over-stimulating environment and focus the individual's attention inward).



OHT 17

Self-Stimulating Behaviors

- The single most defining characteristic of an individual with autism is repetitious, self-stimulating behavior.



OHT 18

Self-Stimulating Behaviors


- Staring at lights or off into space for long periods of time
- Repetitive blinking
- Moving fingers in front of the eyes
- Hand-flapping or snapping fingers
- Tapping ears
- Making vocal sounds
- Rubbing the skin with one's own hands or another object or constant scratching



OHT 19

Self-Stimulating Behaviors

- Rocking the entire body front to back or side to side
- Placing body parts or objects in one's mouth
- Licking objects or smelling objects
- Shifting oneself or other people
- Lining up objects on the floor
- Staring off into space for long periods of time
- Repeating particular sounds or phrases



OHT 20

- k) Sniffing oneself or other people.
 - l) Lining up objects on the floor.
 - m) Repeating particular sounds or phrases.
15. Point out that while many people with autism can look consistently at objects for long periods of time, they often make little eye contact with other people.
16. Point out that some autistic individuals will be non-verbal.
- a) This does not mean that they are unintelligent.
 - b) Responders may have to consider alternatives to verbal communication such as signing, typing, or the use of pictures or storyboards.
17. Explain how some individuals mildly affected by autism may exhibit only slight delays in language development but greater challenges with social interactions.
- a) They may have difficulty initiating and maintaining a conversation.
 - b) Their communication is often described as talking at others instead of to them. For example, a monologue on a favorite subject that continues despite attempts by others to interject comments.
 - c) They may not be able to express their needs or thoughts clearly.
 - d) They may repeat words or phrases.
 - e) Often they will make little eye contact with people, even people they know and are comfortable with.
 - f) They may have difficulties interacting with others for significant periods of time.
 - g) They may appear to lack an awareness of other people around them.
18. Point out that most autistic people don't interact with others for significant periods of time. Autistics will often halt an interaction by walking away and engaging in self-stimulating behavior.

Reference: Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org); Kyle Westphale Foundation (www.kylestreehouse.org); Autism and PDD Support Network (www.autism-pdd.net); Why Does Chris Do That? Some Suggestions Regarding the Cause and Management of the Unusual Behavior of Children and Adults with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome, by Tony Attwood, Revised 2003

Communication

- Some autistic individuals will be non-verbal.
- This does not mean that they are unintelligent.
- Responders may have to consider alternatives to verbal communication, such as signing, typing, or the use of pictures.

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Communication

- Some individuals mildly affected by autism may exhibit only slight delays in language development, yet have greater challenges with social interactions.

OHT 22

Social Interaction

- They may have difficulty initiating and/or maintaining a conversation.
- Their communication is often described as talking at others instead of to them.
- They may not be able to express their needs or thoughts clearly.
- They may repeat words or phrases.

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Social Interaction

- Often they will make little eye contact with people, even people they know and are comfortable with.
- They may have difficulties interacting with others for significant periods of time.
- They may appear to lack an awareness of other people around them.

OHT 24

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(www.autismsociety-nc.org); Autism Myths and Realities,
Robert Needleman, M.D.; www.drspock.com.

SUMMARY

Whether responding to a natural disaster or a uniquely human engineered one, it is imperative that emergency responders understand what autism is and learn how to recognize the signs of this disorder in order to better assist these individuals during an emergency. With preparation and training regarding the needs of these individuals and the special precautions that must be taken, emergency responders can increase the chances of a safe and successful encounter when summoned for everyone concerned.