

Educating Our Autistic Students – The Normal Development Model Doesn't Work

By Dr. Ellenmorris Tiegerman

Children with autism do not learn or acquire information like typical children. They do not follow developmental patterns that we expect in typical learners: communication gestures and vocalizations, followed by single words and word meaning, followed by sentences and social understanding. The most obvious characteristic presented by children with autism is the lack of communicative behaviors as well as, the inability to look, approach, offer, play and imitate. The inability to communicate gives the child the appearance of being "aloof and detached." Therefore, children with autism should not be expected to learn language like typical children.

One of the reasons that children with autism may not be doing well in school is because educators often emphasize the use of a normal development model when teaching. Comparing the child with autism to the typical child is not realistic or educationally appropriate. Presently, whatever the autistic child cannot do at a specific stage becomes the focus of teaching since the normal developmental model is the learning standard. This model has not been helpful in determining what or how to teach children with autism. Educators need to develop learning expectations and standards which are based on the patterns of development unique to children with autism.

Autistic children learn but they learn in different ways. They may progress from an extended period of silence to an echolalic period in which they repeat everything they hear. There are many reports of children who repeat, word for word, news reports, commercials and text materials. They may also acquire a vast amount of technical information on a limited number of specific topics: such as dinosaurs, computers and music. There are also occurrences where extraordinary skills (i.e., savant abilities) begin to appear in young children, such as playing musical compositions on multiple instruments or computing complex mathematical problems. But these skills are always offset by delays in social development, leaving these children without friends and play opportunities. So what should teachers teach?

For children with autism, language is the most important area to be developed. Typical children learn a word, apply it and then generalize it. For children with autism, learning a new word is difficult and painstaking. Hundreds of learning trials and experiences are often

needed to teach a child how and when to use a word appropriately for communicative and social purposes. Even after the word is acquired, the generalization process may never fully be accomplished. Always teach communication first. Teach a child to offer a toy, approach a peer, point to an object, share and play. Never teach "I want" phrases. Never teach from picture cards. Keep language learning natural in meaningful daily activities.

A model reflecting autistic children's developmental patterns needs to be developed and utilized at home and at school. In addition, educators need to teach to children's strengths and not their weaknesses. This means that the present educational system needs to change since it was created for typical learners and not for children with autism. Children with autism learn differently and require an educational approach which reflects their individual style. If public schools do not have the teachers, the resources or the motivation to individualize, then highly specialized schools may be more advantageous.

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