FIVE MYTHS ABOUT AUTISM

by Erin Stauder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the fastest-growing developmental disorders in the United States with a growth rate of more than 1,000 percent, according to the Autism Society. But ASD is still greatly misunderstood by the public.

What is ASD?

Autism is a complex developmental disability and affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. Autism, which typically appears during the first three years of life, is a “spectrum disorder” that affects individuals to varying degrees. There is no known single cause of autism.

According to the Autism Society, a few signs to look for are:

• delay in or lack of spoken language
• repetitive use of language and/or motor mannerisms
• little or no eye contact
• lack of interest in peer relationships
• lack of spontaneous or make-believe play
• persistent fixation on parts of objects

While autism is not curable, it is treatable. Early diagnosis and intervention, including behavioral treatments or medication, can significantly improve social and educational outcomes.

MYTH NO. 1: Individuals with autism are intellectually disabled and lack communication skills.

ASD affects people in different ways, especially with communication. Some children may be somewhat or nearly normal; others may be extremely verbal with rich vocabularies and high reading skills.

For children with autism who are unable to verbally engage, there are alternative forms of communication available. A recent study supported by the group Autism Speaks concluded that the use of American Sign Language for children with autism can be an effective form of communication.

Approximately 10 percent of children with ASD also can show extremely high abilities in specific areas, such as music, math, and memorization. Over the last 20 years, college enrollment rates among students with disabilities have tripled, and almost half (about 44 percent) of children identified with ASD have average-to-above-average intellectual ability.

MYTH NO. 2: Autism affects only boys and girls at the same rate.

Based on genetics and diagnosis, autism does not occur in boys and girls the same way. Even though the American Psychiatric Association reported that boys are two to four times more common than girls, the exact numbers vary. Even girls between the ages of 10 to 19 are more likely to be affected than boys. It is estimated that at least one child in 350 children is affected with autism.

MYTH NO. 3: Most autism care costs are covered by insurance.

Autism therapy is excluded from coverage by many insurance plans. If families do have a plan that covers some or all of the physical cost of autism, there are still significant behavioral costs and other economic burdens that add up to thousands of dollars. Intensive behavioral interventions can cost $40,000 to $60,000 per child per year. There are also a number of direct and indirect costs with medical care, special education, lost parental productivity and more that can significantly burden families.

Roughly half of the U.S. currently requires coverage for treatments of autism spectrum disorders; but medical costs for children with ASD are estimated to be six times higher than for children without ASD.

MYTH NO. 4: Autism is caused by “bad parenting.”

In the 1950s, a theory called the “refrigerator mother hypothesis” arose suggesting that autism was caused by mothers who lacked emotional warmth. Medical and behavioral care providers told parents the reason their child displayed poor social skills was because the child was being neglected or not receiving interactions with the parents.

Particularly the child’s mother. It is now understood that this is not true — autism is not caused by a failure to properly bond to a parent. Yet, some parents still encounter the stigma.

There is no proven correlation between vaccinations and autism, but many myths about autism still lie in the hypothesis that vaccinations cause autism. The increased rate of autism diagnosis has fueled some concerns that environmental exposures, like vaccines, might be to blame. Medical professionals are working to understand the neurological disorder but to date, there is no one known cause of autism.

MYTH NO. 5: Autism Spectrum Disorder is uncommon.

The increased rate of autism likely is driven by a broadened diagnostic criteria and increased awareness. We are now seeing more and more children being diagnosed on the autism spectrum, with 23 percent of households having at least one child receiving Individualized education program services in his or her local school.

The Centers for Disease Control’s Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring reported that approximately one in 68 U.S. children has been identified with ASD, and it can be more common among individuals with affected relatives. Parents who have a child with ASD have a 2 to 18 percent chance of having a second child who is also affected.

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How to Search for a School

Choosing the right school for your child can seem like a daunting task, but many resources are available to help make sure that you make the best choice. The right school or program allows a child to blossom and grow in their passions and knowledge, making this decision an important and life-changing one. But have no fear. Many different programs and services are available right here in Baltimore to assist you in making the right decision for you and your family.

Pathfinders for Autism

For parents of a child diagnosed with autism, Pathfinders for Autism is an excellent place to start. This nonprofit organization focuses on connecting parents with free help, information and much-needed resources. Its site provides a searchable database of more than 2,500 providers along with informative articles and events.

“We provide workshops, training and free events so that families can be out and about together,” says program director Neil Lichter. Visit pathfindersforautism.org for more information.

Kennedy Krieger Institute

Kennedy Krieger works directly with the public school systems of each county to provide specified and local programs to Maryland families of children in grades K to 12. This fall, two new programs will launch with the intention of providing a continuum of services to adult individuals. Project SEARCH at Kennedy Krieger Institute is a 10-month transition program for individuals ages 18 to 24. Core Foundations at Kennedy Krieger Montgomery County Campus provides workshops and employment training. Visit kennedykrieger.org/pathfindersforautism.org.

Partners for Success

Partners for Success centers have been established in each local school system in collaboration with the Maryland State Department of Education. The program aims to bring parents and professionals together as equal partners in the educational decision-making process.

Each program typically offers workshops on the special education process, accommodations and more and also provides opportunities to make presentations on these issues to community groups. It also provides information on local therapeutic recreation, respite care and waiver programs. Check with the city or your county school system to find out what it offers.

—Mag Tippet and Kevin Waller