

Autism Conversations: The sensory entry point

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Adapted from *Autism Conversations: Evaluating Children on the Autism Spectrum through Authentic Conversations* (2010). Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

Autism is a frightening and confusing word for a parent to hear in association with their child. What does it mean when a professional tells a parent their child “has autism” or “meets the diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome,” or has a “Pervasive Developmental Disorder”?

When given a diagnosis, or when parents begin to suspect that their child is developing with unusual behavior patterns, it is natural for them to turn to the internet or to books to learn more. They find lists of behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorders. For the most part, the behaviors listed – deficiencies in development -- are negative ones. That can be frustrating because no parent sees his child as a list of deficiencies. Lists of behaviors can be confusing, as parents may relate some of the behaviors to their child but never the entire list. Parents are left asking the question: where is the description that fits my child?

A visual framework for understanding autism spectrum disorders

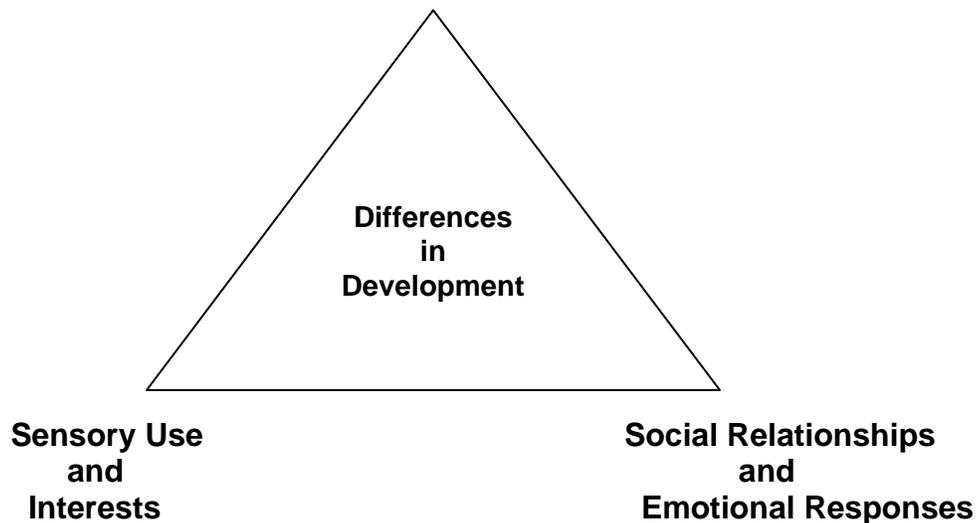
In my work evaluating children suspected of having autism spectrum disorders, I have found that the description that makes the most sense to parents is the one that describes their individual child’s unique way of relating to the world. My book, “Autism Conversations: Evaluating Children on the Autism Spectrum through Authentic Conversations” lays out a visual framework for understanding the differences in development that make up autism spectrum disorders. In this article, I provide an overview of how to approach autism evaluations in a way that allows evaluators to genuinely connect with, and understand the unique worldview of, the child being evaluated.

When we identify children as having autism spectrum disorders, we are noticing a pattern of *differences in development* in three key areas: language and communication; social relationships and emotional responses; and sensory use and interests. This unusual pattern of development is thought to have a neuro-biological base, and I have come to think of children who show these distinctive differences as having a “neuro-atypical” pattern of development.

Children with autism spectrum disorders show a behavioral profile marked by developmental differences in all three key areas. This behavioral profile can be visually depicted by a descriptive triangle that draws attention to the three areas in which these developmental disruptions, or differences, occur:

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Language and Communication



If we approach autism evaluations by *describing* the child's behaviors in each of the three areas instead of *labeling* the child, we will develop a nuanced and detailed behavioral profile that helps us understand the child's way of relating to the world. We want to answer the question: how does this child make sense of the world?

Neuro-atypical and neuro-typical communications

Let's look at the descriptive triangle for a moment and discuss the differences in relating to the world between children with a "neuro-typical" pattern of development and those with a "neuro-atypical" pattern. Neuro-typical children (children who do not have autism spectrum disorders) relate to the world through language and communication, and connect with others in a social and emotional way. They may have sensory preferences and particular interests, but these preferences and interests do not drive their way of relating to others.

In contrast, neuro-atypical children (children with autism spectrum disorders) experience a distinctively different entry point to the world. They are driven to create sensory experiences that are pleasurable and predictable (sensory-seeking routines) while managing anxiety about their sensory sensitivities, such as unexpected noises, food and clothing aversions, overwhelming visual input or noxious smells. Even very verbal children with Asperger's Syndrome organize their conversations around their beloved preferred topics, sharing facts and details with others in a way that includes a distinctly sensory and self-directed quality. When we

understand this fundamental difference in development for children on the autism spectrum we are more likely to approach our evaluations and conversations with them in a way that respects these differences.

Think about the way in which you would typically approach a child to begin a conversational exchange. Most likely, the exchange would begin with a social greeting or smile: the entry points for language and social relationships. Shared eye contact, facial expressions, and the modeling of gestures and expressions create a bond between the two individuals participating in the conversation.

Now imagine beginning a conversational exchange with a child who has the pattern of developmental differences that make up autism spectrum disorders. What happens when social conversation, eye contact, and smiles are used as an entry point to start the conversational exchange? When children with autism spectrum differences in development are approached in a language intensive and social way, they react by withdrawing or becoming confused. This social and language-based approach often creates anxiety and distress in children whose natural entry point into the world is sensory-based.

So what is the best way to invite a child on the autism spectrum into a shared conversational exchange?

Start the conversation using the child's sensory entry point, described below. Children with Asperger's Syndrome struggle socially because they almost always start conversations *in the middle* rather than starting with social banter. They jump into telling a conversational partner facts or details about a preferred topic without checking for social cues to gauge social information. These cues include what the individual was doing when he or she was approached, whether or not the individual is listening, and whether or not the individual has the background context to understand the comments being made about the preferred topic that is of such intense interest to the speaker.

Less verbal children with autism spectrum disorders also start their conversations with others in the middle. They may attempt to start a conversational exchange by acting out a role, either taking on the characteristics of an animal with which they are enthralled (dinosaurs and sharks come to mind) or repeating verbatim dialogue from a preferred movie.

In any case, the reaction encountered by children with autism spectrum disorders usually follows a pattern of being told to stop talking about their selected topic or to behave differently. Rarely are neuro-atypical children approached through their sensory entry point and encouraged to share their worldview. When they are, they truly enjoy the opportunity to share their sensory-driven perspective with another person.

When I interview children suspected of having an autism spectrum disorder, I start my conversation using the child's sensory entry point. This "neuro-atypical" conversation is one that children find relaxing and enjoyable. Not surprisingly, when children with autism spectrum disorders experience a pleasurable shared conversational exchange that takes their sensory perspective into account, they share their insights into their relationships with others. The understanding gained from a "neuro-atypical" conversation helps evaluators talk about children in individual and practical terms that make intuitive sense to the child's parents and educators. The child can then be described with a nuanced behavioral profile about what he can do, instead of with a list of behavior deficits and a diagnostic label.

Sensory entry points in the “neuro-atypical” conversation

So what exactly is a “neuro-atypical” conversation? It begins with the introduction of sensory toys or topics instead of social conversation.

For nonverbal children, the conversation begins in the middle when a toy with pleasing sensory properties is introduced, such as a globe that spins and lights up when a button is pushed, or sensory stress balls that provide different textures when squeezed and pulled. Nonverbal children with autism respond best to the conversation if there is no talking to begin with -- only the shared experience of watching the toys and their sensory properties. I often have two toys of the same kind because then I can invite the child into the sensory conversation by handing one toy to him or her while I keep a similar toy to model different ways to play with it.

For verbal children on the autism spectrum, the conversation typically begins in the middle with the introduction of that child’s preferred topic. Asking comparison questions and jumping into the child’s favorite topic at the start of the conversation sends a signal to that child that you are in sync with that child’s worldview. If the child’s interest is in space I might ask a comparison question about whether solid mass or gaseous planets are most interesting to him. I also introduce sensory toys that can be used to extend the verbal conversation. For a child who loves planets, I might place sensory stress balls of various sizes on the table so we can arrange them into the solar system.

What about children who have an aversion to touch and are tactilely defensive? They respond best when the entry point for the conversation avoids introducing the demand to touch objects. Instead, with tactilely defensive children, I start the conversation by manipulating cause-and-effect toys that create pleasing visual and auditory patterns. Pressing a button on a globe to produce spinning lights, blowing bubbles, or activating a panel on a toy to generate music or movement that creates music or movement are examples of the evaluator creating visual and auditory entry points for children who are reluctant to touch objects. The initial lack of prompting for the child to touch the objects allows that child to relax and to engage in the conversational exchange. This often leads to the child’s spontaneous physical exploration of the toys as the session progresses.

The category of toys and materials most appropriate for each individual child’s sensory entry point depends on that child’s specific sensory seeking needs and sensitivities. Examples of categories of sensory toys and materials include visual cause-and-effect toys, noisemakers, tactile objects, science toys, art work created by the child, and physical movement activities. With training, evaluators learn how to select the category of sensory toys that provides the best conversational entry point for each child they evaluate.

Through this process of starting the evaluation with the “neuro-atypical” conversation, I have found that children genuinely enjoy sharing their sensory world with others. When children on the spectrum experience acceptance and genuine interest in their interests, a more nuanced and complete understanding of the child emerges from the evaluation process. Evaluators gain a deeper understanding of the child’s sensory-driven perspective. Through that understanding, it becomes possible to outline a detailed and individualized plan to help that child develop the social and communication skills needed to adapt to the demands of the neuro-typical worlds of school, peers, and life in general.

Marilyn J. Monteiro, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist specializing in autism spectrum disorders, is the author of *Monteiro Interview Guidelines for Diagnosing Asperger's Syndrome (MIGDAS)*, an evaluation protocol for verbal children with suspected autism spectrum disorders. Her book, *Autism Conversations*, links qualitative assessment methods to best practice in autism diagnosis and intervention. Dr. Monteiro maintains an independent practice in Dallas.

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