

Autism and Educational Psychology



*all children and adults featured in photos are models

Autism and Educational Psychology

It is important to understand that the term '*autism*' is a medical term and only medical practitioners, with suitable qualifications, can say whether a child is autistic or not. If a parent or carer has any concerns about whether their child is autistic, they should visit their General Practitioner (GP) and obtain their professional opinion about whether a referral to a suitably qualified expert is necessary.

Educational Psychologists are not medically qualified and they do not offer to diagnose autism or indeed to speculate on whether or not a child might meet the criteria for a diagnosis of autism.

Educational Psychologists may be consulted about any aspect of a child's development or behaviour, whether or not they have a medical diagnosis.

Educational Psychologists are also experts in assessing the Special Educational Needs of children who have a diagnosis of autism and they can give advice to parents about what provision is available to meet the child's Special Educational Needs. It is important to understand that children with a diagnosis of autism show as many differences from each other as any other children and above all they must be assessed as the individuals they are.

The Medical Model

Generally speaking if you take your child to a *medical doctor*, they will adopt a medical approach using the so-called '*medical model*', which is very familiar to us. This means the doctor:

- asks what the ***symptoms*** are.
- makes a ***diagnosis*** based on the symptoms.
- suggests an appropriate ***treatment***, if there is one.
- following the treatment, decides whether a ***cure*** has been possible or whether there is no cure and only the symptoms can be treated.

The Learning Model

If you take your child to an *educational psychologist*, they will adopt a different approach using the so-called '**learning model**'. This means the psychologist:

- listens to what the parents and teachers say about the child's **development** and **progress**.
- determines **what the child can do** and **what the child cannot do** with some reference to what most children can do at a particular age.
- determines what they, or you, would like the child to **learn**.
- suggests **ways of encouraging and teaching the child** so that

they can achieve what they, or you, have decided.

- reviews their **progress** and suggests what the **next step** might be.

The *learning model* can be applied to **all** children irrespective of any medical diagnosis they may have.

A Word of Caution

Professional practitioners, whether they are medically trained or practise as psychologists, do not speculate about children's development and educational needs. It is only through a careful and thorough assessment, based on their training and experience, that they arrive at a point where they are prepared to give their professional opinion.

Many parents have been unnecessarily upset by

speculation from people who are not qualified to pass comment or to give an opinion. What they say may be based on hearsay and only partial knowledge or evidence. It takes many years of training and experience to distinguish between different types of behaviour observed in children and this is especially true when the behaviour is thought to be extreme. The best advice for any parent, who is concerned about their child and their child's development, should be to obtain a professional opinion at the earliest opportunity.

If unqualified people choose to give their opinion on what might be the reason for the behaviour they observe in a child, they should be asked what relevant professional qualifications they have and what evidence they are using when they draw their conclusions.



Psychological Assessment

Children who have been diagnosed with autism may have Special Educational Needs. In these circumstances, it is appropriate to carry out an assessment following the framework in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. It is possible to obtain a free copy the Code of Practice from the government, or download it at:

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=3724>

Some behaviours that might be discussed with an educational psychologist are:

- significant difficulties with language development
- significant difficulty in engaging in social interactions
- an inconsistent response to sensory input with perhaps periods of apparent deafness or unresponsiveness
- a very restricted range of interests and activities which may be highly focused and repeated constantly

Asperger's Syndrome

Some autistic children are given the additional diagnostic label of **Asperger's Syndrome**. All that has been said above would apply to children with Asperger's Syndrome and the need for a professional opinion applies equally to children who may be thought to have Asperger's Syndrome.

OEAC



Further Information:

Information and advice about autism can be obtained from the National Autistic Society.

<http://www.autism.org.uk/>

For Advice on Educational Psychology Assessment visit :

<http://www.oeac.co.uk/>