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Personal growth

Is education blooming in our school gardens?

A sense of wonder

Using sensory equipment to promote educational development

Autism Awareness Month

The way forward for autism research and support

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ADHD • transition to adult services • recruitment • CPD and much more...

ADHD and autism

Diagnosis must recognise the many similarities, as well as the differences, in how ASD and ADHD present, write **Mark Chapman** and **Jayne O'Brien**

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) are connected in a number of ways. Indeed, they can have some of the exact same overlapping symptoms. Importantly, these overlapping symptoms can cause the young person to be incorrectly diagnosed with one condition rather than the other.

Most parents find it worrying not knowing the source of their child's challenges; however, there isn't always a definitive answer and diagnosis is not as straight forward as many people expect. In some cases, it is important to abandon the diagnosis debate and focus on an action plan to address and support the difficulties the young person is going through. With this in mind, it would be more productive to think about what interventions would

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be most helpful, although systemically it is not always possible to do this. It's crucial, though, that the assessing clinician is mindful of the overlapping symptoms of the two conditions.

When facing a diagnostically challenging situation it would be best to suggest a behavioural intervention, as this could be informative and support an accurate diagnosis. In most instances, it is vital to be aware that having one condition can, in fact, increase the chance of having symptoms of the other condition.

Looking at this from a developmental perspective, and to highlight a good example, a young person with a defined language disorder will most probably go on to develop a reading disorder.

The latest research allows for a child to be diagnosed with both conditions according to the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - fifth edition).

Overlapping symptoms

Young people with autism who have trouble paying attention to tasks in class could also be struggling with language difficulties. Someone with language difficulties may come across as if they are not paying attention to directions. However, the source of the problem could be that they don't truly understand the directions in the first place.

Young people with ADHD can have lots of problems that impact on their social skills, for example avoiding direct

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eye contact or unintentionally getting into other people's space without being able to gauge the appropriateness of this behaviour. The source of this behaviour is the impulsivity.

It is crucial to consider all aspects of a young person's developmental functioning in behaviour, mood, academic skills, social skills and play skills. The goal is to get a complete picture to ensure both conditions (ASD and ADHD) as assessed carefully.



Similarities in some presentations can cause ADHD and autism to be misdiagnosed.

Typical presentation of symptoms of ADHD and ASD

	ADHD	Autism
Communication	<p>In some cases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> fast or slurred speech slow speed of processing spoken language. 	<p>Abnormal development of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> receptive and expressive language attachments to parents or family reciprocal (to and fro) social interaction functional or symbolic play pitch, tone, volume and rhythm of speech non-verbal communication – avoiding eye contact, lacking use of facial expression and gestures to initiate and regulate social interaction.
Social difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> short spells of play/activities often leaves activities unfinished over-frequent changes between activities unwarranted lack of persistence at adult-led tasks highly distractible during work lacks perseverance with activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pre-occupied with parts of objects or specific details of play objects rather than the bigger context of play pre-occupied with restricted patterns of interest that are abnormal in content or focus. difficulty transitioning between activities difficulty regulating behaviour appropriate to immediate the environment highly distractible during work and by specific noises difficulties developing friendships (that involve joint sharing of interests, activities and emotions) lacks reciprocity (to and fro) in social interactions appropriate to the context.
Hyperactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> constant or extreme restlessness (seems unable to sit still) excessive fidgeting and wriggling excessive activity when stillness is expected (such as at mealtimes or during travel) frequently leaves seat when expected to sit frequently struggles to play quietly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> can have an over-active or under-active presentation.
Impulsivity/ compulsions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty waiting (turn taking or in group situations) regularly interrupts (for example, butts into conversations or activities) shouts out at inappropriate times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty waiting (turn taking or in group situations) talking over social partner in conversation to redirect the conversation to preoccupations or special interests compulsive observance of routines or rituals distress over the smallest change hand or finger flapping, tapping or twisting.

Distinct conditions

Above is a list of some of the symptoms that will often be evidenced for the two conditions. It shows some of the differences and similarities in typical presentations of autism and ADHD.

The idea that needs to be highlighted to parents is that ADHD and autism are two separate and distinct conditions that happen to be found together

much more frequently than would be expected by chance alone. They are both life-long conditions and it is important that diagnosis is accurate and useful. Everyone involved should be aware that diagnosis is a very serious matter which can have huge consequences for the child or young person's future. **SEN**

Further information

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