Social Communication Difficulties and Autistic Spectrum Conditions

Community Paediatrics
Difficulties in a Child's Development

All children develop at a different rate. In the population as a whole there will be a range of abilities. Some children’s development may be slower or different from other children and this may lead to problems.

This can be called a developmental difficulty or disorder. There are lots of different types of developmental difficulty. There are several areas of a child’s development; for example physical ability, social skills and learning ability. If a child has problems in one area it is common for there to be problems in another area too. It can take time and several assessments, often by several professionals to get a full picture of your child. It is important not to rush this so as to get the right description or diagnosis for your child.

Community Paediatricians are children’s doctors that specialise in developmental disorders and disability. At the first appointment the doctor will take an overall look at your child’s development; and assess your child’s strengths and needs.

Difficulties with social communication and interaction are seen in children with a variety of developmental difficulties. These include learning difficulties, language disorders, problems with hearing, eyesight, attention and coordination difficulties. Some children have sensory difficulties such as seeking the feel of people or objects or are very sensitive to touch or sound. Children with developmental difficulties may also have mental health problems such as anxiety and low mood. Sometimes children have social interaction and communication difficulties on their own, without other developmental problems.

Social Communication and Interaction Difficulties

What are they?

Children with social communication and interaction difficulties have problems understanding what other people mean. Communication is not just the words we use; but how we use our body language, facial expression and tone of voice to communicate with someone else.
Children with these difficulties may find it hard to understand the messages we give to each other without speaking, such as the meaning we put into our voice, the expressions on our faces, and gestures such as waving, pointing or shrugging.

Eye contact is another important part of non-speaking communication, and most of us do this without thinking about it. Children with social communication difficulties may not know instinctively how and when to give eye contact.

Children with social communication and interaction difficulties can also have trouble in understanding what other people are thinking or feeling; finding it difficult to see things from someone else’s point of view. They may do things which seem out of place; such as talking in a very loud voice to the person who is standing next to them, talking continually about things that interest them to someone they have never met before, and taking turns can be challenging. This can often make it hard to make or keep friends and join in games.

Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC)

Children with Autistic Spectrum Conditions have difficulties in three main areas:

Communication and language:

- difficulties with social use of language
- cannot start or keep conversations going
- inappropriate facial expressions and body language
- literal interpretation of speech
- not understanding jokes and sarcasm
- limited or unusual pretend play
- unusual or repetitive language
- speech difficulties.
Social and emotional understanding:

• lack of awareness of others’ feelings
• lack of empathy
• absent or unusual eye-contact, gestures and expressions
• difficulties with friendships
• difficulty working with others
• does not spontaneously share interest and enjoyment with others
• if distressed does not seek comfort.

Flexibility of thought and behaviour:

• dislikes change
• difficulty with problem solving
• likes rigid routines
• obsession with particular objects or subjects
• restricted range of interests
• unusual or repetitive gestures or actions.

Within the population as a whole, people have a range of these difficulties. When these are marked and cause a child significant difficulties it is useful to think about how best to describe the difficulties (the diagnostic process).

For a diagnosis of ASC it is necessary to have significant difficulties in all three of these areas. Children have individual patterns of strengths and difficulties; the way they present can vary widely. Some children have some difficulties in one or more of these areas, but not all of them, and so don’t have a diagnosis of full Autistic Spectrum Condition.

Children can be diagnosed with an ASC when they’re quite young – in some cases from the age of about two years. But not everyone is diagnosed early in life. It’s common for older children and adults to be diagnosed with an ASC; particularly those children who have fewer problems with speaking and learning.
Assessment for Social Communication Difficulties and Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC)

ASC can be diagnosed by some doctors and some psychologists using information from the other professionals involved.

Before the Assessment

Before seeing you and your child in clinic:

- we have the information available from the professional who referred you (e.g. EHA, referral form, and any further information provided)
- we may request additional information from your child’s school or preschool
- we may request additional information from other professionals involved with your child
- we may request additional information from you (e.g. questionnaires).

Assessment

Assessment is based on:

- a developmental history (information from you about your child over their life at the clinic appointment)
- a more detailed history about any social communication difficulties if needed
- observation of your child - in clinic, and by other professionals seeing your child at home or at school (e.g. a speech and language therapist, specialist teacher, school staff).

For school aged children we use a structured observational assessment (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule or ‘ADOS’).

We also look actively for other developmental and emotional issues which are seen commonly in children with ASC.
Problems commonly associated with ASC:

- poor coordination
- anxiety and low mood
- sensory issues
- attention difficulties
- learning difficulties
- tics
- seizures.

Other professionals that may become involved in assessment and management of children with Social Communication Difficulties and ASC are:

- Early Years Specialist Support teachers (preschool)
- Specialist Teachers (providing advice to school)
- Speech and Language Therapists
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Professionals
- Educational Psychologists
- Occupational Therapists

Diagnosis and Further help

At the end of the assessment process the paediatrician will discuss with you the overall findings from the assessment. If appropriate a final diagnosis will be discussed and a plan made for your child’s on-going needs. The paediatrician will write a report which will be shared with professionals involved in your child’s care, with your consent, and make recommendations for further support and help that may be available.

What can be done?

There are many useful strategies to use with children who have social communication difficulties e.g. social stories, visual symbols. Children with social communication difficulties can often learn the rules of appropriate behaviour for social situations. Understanding the nature of the difficulties is important for families and nursery or school staff, so they can understand why a child behaves in a certain way and which strategies are likely to be helpful.
Useful Websites

Early Support information about a range of developmental conditions updated to include information about ASD for children of all ages and suggestions for help:

http://www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources/new-information-resources

www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/childrenandfamilies/specialneedsdisabilities

National Autistic Society - lots of downloadable information:

www.autism.org.uk
www.researchautism.net (impartial advice about interventions)
www.autismhelp.info (practical advice for parents and teachers)

Support

National Autistic Society (NAS) Helpline 08450 70404
Local National Autistic Society Branch 07920 150407

Other Resources

We have further information leaflets about ASC and useful strategies. Please ask your doctor (many of these are from the NAS website).
For further information about this service contact:

Community Paediatrics
The Peacock Centre
Brookfield's Campus
351 Mill Road
Cambridge
CB1 3DF

Tel: 01223 218072

Email: ccs-tr.communitypaediatricssouth@nhs.net

If you require this information in a different format such as in large print or on audio tape, or in a different language please contact the service on the details above.

If you have any compliments about this service or suggestions for improvements, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 0300 131 1000 (charges may apply depending on your network) or email: ccs-tr.pals@nhs.net.

For free, confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year please contact NHS 111.