Practice Parameters for the Assessment and Treatment of Children, Adolescents, and Adults With Autism and Other Pervasive Developmental Disorders

ABSTRACT

Autism and the related pervasive developmental disorders are characterized by patterns of delay and deviance in the development of social, communicative, and cognitive skills, which arise in the first years of life. Although frequently associated with mental retardation, these conditions are distinctive in terms of their course and treatment. These conditions have a wide range of syndrome expression, and their management presents particular challenges for clinicians. Individuals with these conditions can present for clinical care at any point in development. The multiple developmental and behavioral problems associated with these conditions often require the care of multiple providers; coordination of services and advocacy for individuals and their families is important. Early, sustained intervention is indicated, as is the use of various treatment modalities (e.g., pharmacotherapy, special education, speech/communication therapy, and behavior modification). *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 1999, 38(12 Supplement):32S–54S. **Key Words:** autism, practice parameters, guidelines, developmental disorders, pervasive developmental disorders, children, adolescents, adults.

Autism and the pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs) are neuropsychiatric disorders characterized by patterns of delay and deviance in the development of social, communicative, and cognitive skills. These conditions have their onset in the first years of life, disrupt diverse developmental processes, and are often associated with mental retardation. These conditions differ from primary mental retardation and from the language and other specific developmental disorders in that the behavioral features and patterns of development are observed in multiple areas, are highly distinctive, and are not simply a manifestation of developmental delay.

The diverse expression of autism and the other PDDs over the course of development presents some of the greatest challenges for clinicians. Individuals with these conditions may present for evaluation and treatment at any point during their development. For example, clinicians may be involved in the initial assessment of the toddler and subsequently in the treatment of that child as he or she matures through middle child-hood and adolescence. In addition, autism and PDDs are associated with a tremendous range in syndrome expression, that is, symptoms change over the course of development and in relation to the degree of any associated mental handicap. An awareness of the range of syndrome expression and an appreciation of the complexities of developmental change are important. Each child requires a unique, comprehensive program of services provided by professionals from diverse disciplines. One of these professionals must be responsible for service coordination and advocacy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Autism and other PDDs are conditions of onset in the first years of life which disrupt various developmental processes. The diverse expression of these disorders both across and within individuals presents particular challenges for clinical assessment and treatment. Individuals with these conditions may present for evaluation and treatment at any point in the life cycle. Clinicians must be aware of the tremendous range in syndrome expression and the complexities of developmental change. The variety, intensity, and comprehensiveness of services needed by individuals with these conditions as well as the participation of professionals from various disciplines require the efforts of some professional to coordinate and advocate for