

The Outcome of Childhood Autism in Adulthood: The Mental Health Effects of Adults

Diagnosed with Autism as Children

Matthew A. Alighchi

University of Nevada, Reno

The Outcome of Childhood Autism in Adulthood: The Mental Health Effects of Adults

Diagnosed with Autism as Children

Adulthood, the necessary period of leaving behind our youth, is exciting to many who are in the transition process, and even to those well beyond it. However, for those suffering with autism, this process is more frightening and difficult. Children with autism, a mental disorder characterized by difficulties with communicating and forming relationships with other people, have a much harder time becoming independent as social interactions become more necessary. The difficulty and stress of adulthood causes so many problems that more than half of adults with autism to be living poorly. Even though this statistic has risen from earlier reports of success rate of less than forty percent (Volkmar & Wolf, 2013), it is still very troubling that only half of those diagnosed with autism report to be living well, and even more so troubling given that these problems are preventable. Many of the issues aren't caused by the autism itself but rather the circumstances, such as abuse and neglect, that surround the disorder. The circumstances are bred from a lack of proper education for parents and the public, because proper care can result in those diagnosed with autism to be productive members of society (Hendricks, 2009). Even though autism is getting more awareness and support, there is still more in order to fully integrate autistic people into society. Therefore, this essay will describe the problems adults diagnosed with autism in childhood exhibit outside of the disorder, the cause of said problems, and possible treatment methods.

From childhood, those diagnosed with autism struggle with people in many ways, thus these behaviors take a toll far into their adulthood. While some symptoms do go away in adulthood in many adults, the overwhelming majority of those diagnosed with autism still exhibit many of the

symptoms of autism including social impairments. Since so many symptoms persist, these adults demonstrate some form of negative behavior that can permanently affect their lives. Only twenty-five percent of diagnosed adults claim to have meaningful friendships, and many have difficulty with sexual relationships. Furthermore, the failure of these adults in understanding social norms can result in legal trouble such as stalking and other inappropriate behavior (Volkmar & Wolf, 2013). While not everyone with autism exhibits these problems, it is still prevalent enough to be a cause of concern. Since many autistic people do not improve substantially from childhood, the resources currently available are not enough to properly help them. However, it is not simply just a matter of helping them with their autism, because many problems with autistic adults go beyond the symptoms of autism; not only do they have a much harder time communicating with other people, they struggle with employment, community, and even other mental disorders. Many characteristics of autism make the adults seem undesirable as employees, so many autistic adults fail to go beyond an interview. Therefore, unemployment rate is incredibly high for autistic adults, and even the ones that are employed still face hardship. They often must switch jobs, get lower pay than normal adults, and are more likely to get fired. Similar mistreatment exists within their own communities. Autistic adults are often perceived as creepy or rude, resulting in social isolation and very little meaningful contact. These wrongdoings, unfortunately result in negative consequences. Many autistic adults exhibit schizophrenic tendencies, obsessive compulsive disorder, and a higher risk of addiction (Hendricks, 2009). The issue with autism is not autism itself, but rather what the disorder entails socially for those who suffer with it. It is clear the social stigma and lack of understanding of autism affects adults tremendously in their efforts for success and happiness. Without proper

treatment and care, many autistic children are unable to fully transition into adulthood, and has a much harder time getting to the same living conditions as normal people. The current state of autism resources is lacking as many still shun autistic people. The opportunities for autistic people are too few and far to ignore, as it is affecting the efficiency of society.

While all of the problems present in adults diagnosed with autism are problematic, but they aren't a direct cause of autism but rather society's treatment of autistic people. Therefore, to create better care for autistic children and adults, the problem must be addressed. The most infamous example in recent history is the campaign linking autism and vaccines. Not only was this a smear campaign against modern medicine, but also a device to humiliate people with autism. With the help of celebrity endorsement, autistic people became seen as outcasts and undesirable children. Whether it be this be the event that sparked it, or just society's disdain for such people, autistic people are the target of harassment and ridicule. A recent study illuminates that at least sixteen percent of autistic people experience sexual abuse and at least twenty-five percent experience physical abuse. While the study is limited, and the numbers aren't too different from the general population, autistic people are still much more susceptible to abuse than other people. As previously mentioned, people with autism struggle with social cues and norms, so they are much less likely to call for help or notice a predatory situation. Furthermore, its likely there are more abuse victims, because they are less likely to recognize the abuse or speak out about it (Sevlever et al., 2013). With such a victimization problem, the prevalence of other mental disorders, and a lack of improvement with autism have a strong correlation to factors outside of autism. Unfortunately, the limited amount of studies on the subject matter makes it hard to perceive the full scope of the problem, thus more research needs to be done in

order for a stronger correlation to exist and to create more support from the general population. Similarly, to abuse, neglect is one of the biggest causes for onset problems for autistic people. Even if there is no abuse in the family, many parents still hold a very strong stigma against autism. Many parents find their child's behavior embarrassing, rude and hard to deal with. The stigma is so great that many parents even have a hard time distinguishing from actual behavior of their child and their preconceived notion of the disorder. Since the stigma of having an autistic child is still heavy with many parents, so some choose to cope by not dealing with the disorder. For many parents, they would much rather ignore the disease than to accommodate for their child's disorder (Gray, 2002). Parental involvement is an important part of a child's development, regardless of their mental status, but the stigma against autism is a direct cause of developmental problems. Some researchers suggest that the cause of said stigma for autism, and by extension other mental health disorders, are shunned by parents because it is evolutionarily unappealing. The mental equivalent of a deer with small antlers, so the parents, in particular the mother, put less emphasis on the child (Shaner, Miller, & Mintz, 2008). Regardless of the cause, the neglect of autistic children should not be tolerated. Untreated autism has severe implications for those affected which range from bullying to sexual abuse, thus causing many problems in adulthood. It is overwhelmingly clear that improper parenting and schooling are the main points of contention for autism, thus the best treatment for autism starts at home.

While the problems with autism are clearly defined, the solutions are much vaguer. There is no single answer to treating autism, and because of how vast the disorder is, it seems almost impossible to fully treat. However, that does not stop researchers from finding new and better ways to help people with autism overcome their symptoms. One study suggests that humanoid

robots may improve and motivate autistic children's ability for social interaction. Over a hundred-day period, researchers let children, aged from five to ten, interact with robots and studied if their social skills improved. By the ninetieth day, almost all of the patients exhibited positive results, even including eye contact (Robins, Dautenhahn, Boekhorst & Billard, 2005). However, while the results were positive, it does not determine if the experiment will have any lasting effect. Furthermore, it does not take into account the patients' lives at home nor their treatment at school. This becomes a recurring theme with research pertaining to autism; the inability to obtain meaningful progress over a large period of time. Without more recent and more efficient research, it is difficult to create a prevalent theory for treating autism. Some suggest that a single solution is impossible and can even worsen autistic patients' condition, so it should be treated by a case by case basis. However, they suggest that there should be an overarching theme; focus on increasing their ability to create and maintain meaningful relationships (Greenspan & Wieder, 2007). Relationships are the key to treating autism, however acceptance and understanding are important factors to consider.

As more development goes into autism, the long terms effect become more prevalent and concerning. Autistic adults' substantially low success rate is an effect of improper parenting and victimization. Therefore, in order to help adults diagnosed with autism function in society, there must be more care in their childhood development.

References

- Gray, D. E. (2002). 'Everybody just freezes. Everybody is just embarrassed': Felt and enacted stigma among parents of children with high functioning autism. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 24(6), 734-749.
- Greenspan, S. I., & Wieder, S. (2006). *Engaging autism: Using the floortime approach to help children relate, communicate, and think*. Perseus Books Group.
- Hendricks, D. R., & Wehman, P. (2009). Transition from school to adulthood for youth with autism spectrum disorders: Review and recommendations. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 24(2), 77-88.
- Robins, B., Dautenhahn, K., Te Boekhorst, R., & Billard, A. (2005). Robotic assistants in therapy and education of children with autism: can a small humanoid robot help encourage social interaction skills?. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 4(2), 105-120.
- Sevlever, M., Roth, M. E., & Gillis, J. M. (2013). Sexual abuse and offending in autism spectrum disorders. *Sexuality and Disability*, 31(2), 189-200.
- Shaner, A., Miller, G., & Mintz, J. (2008). Autism as the low-fitness extreme of a parentally selected fitness indicator. *Human Nature*, 19(4), 389-413.
- Volkmar, F. R., & Wolf, J. M. (2013). When children with autism become adults. *World Psychiatry*, 12(1), 79-80.