

Lingual and Social Problems of Autistic Children A Field Research Done in Erbil City

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Abstract

Autism is a severe disorder marked by social impairment, poor communication skills, and repetitive stereotyped movements. Autism affects people of every race, ethnic group, and socio economic background. Its severity varies from a child to another. The present paper focuses on lingual and social problems of autistic children in Erbil city. The researcher has chosen "Autism Centre" for conducting the field research. Ten children are chosen as data for the present study. Autism ranges in severity. Thus, the researcher has divided the children into two groups: children with mild autism and others with severe autism disorder. The language use of these children, their social interaction and behavior will be compared to those of normal children of the same age, gender, and socio economic background.

The researcher has observed that children with severe autism cannot speak at all, and those with mild autism rarely speak, while all normal children have a clear language. The researcher has observed that children with autism whether 'severe or mild' lack awareness of others. They cannot build friendships, and they never play in groups. They cannot use facial expressions, they do not exchange emotion, and all of them have repetitive behavior. Comparing the normal children with autistic children, the researcher has found out that the main factor which differentiates the two groups is social interaction. Each autistic child lives in an isolated world where there is no place for others. Autism disorder is not curable, but appropriate treatments can help the children overcome life difficulties and carry on their daily needs.

1. Introduction

The main thing people lack when they first come into contact with people who have autism or first discover signs of the disorder in a family member is knowledge. Knowledge of autism helps you understand and enables you to communicate with autistic people in a right way. So "autism is a group of developmental brain disorders, collectively called autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The term "spectrum" refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills, and levels of impairment or disability that children with autism can have" (National Institute of Mental Health: 1). Autism is also defined by Comer and Gould (498) as a severe disorder marked by social impairment, poor communication skills, and firm, inflexible behavior. So, "autistic disorder is a chronic disorder whose symptoms include

failure to develop normal social relations with other people, impaired imaginative ability, and repetitive stereotyped movements"(Carlson: 495).

Autism affects people of every race, ethnic group, and socio economic background. Its severity varies from a child to another. Autistic children face difficulties in communicating with others and also in understanding what others say to them. They can hardly interact socially with others. They need special care and treatment. The present paper focuses on two important problems of autistic children, firstly, language impairment with focus on other communication problems, and secondly, the social problems they get by autism disorder with reference to their behavior and interaction.

2. Review of Literature

"The syndrome 'autism' was named and characterized by Kanner(1943) , who chose the term (auto," self"-ism "condition") to refer to the child's apparent self absorption"(Carlson: 495).

Children with autism are self-absorbed and seem to exist in a private world where they are unable to communicate and interact with others. Many autistic children have problems in communicating with others verbally, through language. "Speech doesn't develop as expected" (Volkmar, Paul, Klin, and Cohen: 227), and nonverbally through "eye gaze, facial expression, and gestures" (Sussman). They also have abnormal interests and behavior. Delays in communication and speech development are the first to be noticed by parents as Gaicomo and Fombonne(1998) mentioned.

Autism is thought to be biologically based. "Researchers and mental health professionals are convinced that autism is caused by biological factors 'genetic ones' in addition to a variety of non genetic pathological conditions, especially those that occur during prenatal development can produce symptoms of autism" (Carlson:497- 498). Scovel (83), too, assures that autism has neurological origins rather than behavioral ones.

Parents never want to hear that their child has been diagnosed with autism and they certainly find it very difficult to accept the fact that autism has no cure. Myers and Johnson (1162) assure that autism is not generally curable.

Parents and caregivers of children with autism should help their children communicate and interact with others. To provide the right support, they need to understand and comprehend autism spectrum disorder.

2.1. Lingual Problems of Autistic Children

Autistic children's ability to use language varies from a child to another depending on the level of autistic impairment. "Deficits in language and communication are characteristics of the school-age child with ASD. Many children with ASD still have little language by age 5 or 6"(Loveland and Landry: 335-349).

Shriberg, Paul, Mcsweeny, Klin, and Cohen(1097) assure that the speech of children with ASD often sounds different from that of other children. Children with autism have been found to produce 'frequent articulation errors' or 'unintelligible utterances' or 'utterances that are inappropriate in phrasing'.

"Many children with ASD do not reach a level of language development at which true conversational exchanges are possible". A child's conversation may focus on limited topics of interest"(Volkmar, Paul, Klin, and Cohen: 251-257).

The NIDCD presents certain facts about autistic children. It mentions that children with autism use repetitive or rigid language. They say things that have no meaning or that seem out of context while talking to others for example, 'a child may count from one to five repeatedly'. So, echolalia, 'the repetition of words the child hears over and over', is another characteristic of autism. Some children may deliver an 'in-depth monologue' about a topic they are interested in and they may not be able to carry on 'a two-way conversation' about the same topic. Some children may have a strong vocabulary in a particular area of interest, some children can read without comprehending what they read, and they do not respond to their names and the speech of others.

"Research shows that about half of the children diagnosed with autism remain mute throughout their lives. Those who do speak often use language in unusual ways. Some seem unable to combine words into meaningful sentences. Some speak only single words. Others repeat the same phrase no matter what the situation" (Discovery Heath. Com Writers).

2.2. Social problems of Autistic Children

Volkmar, Paul, Klin, and Cohen(249) state that deficits in social behavior and social understanding are characteristics of autistic people. Children with autism fail to establish peer relationships, lack the ability to make normal relationships with familiar people, and prefer to stay alone.

Slater and Bremner(698) assure that one of the specific behaviors associated with impairments in social interaction is eye contact. "Autistic children often avoid eye contact, which can make them seem rude, uninterested, or inattentive. Children with autism become frustrated in their attempt to make their feeling and needs known. They may act out their frustration through vocal outbursts or other inappropriate behaviors" (NIDCD).

Volkmar, Paul, Klin, and Cohen(265) focus on another feature of autistic children and that is 'repetitive behavior' such as 'hand clapping and rocking'. They may also have intense interests, for example having intensive interests in weather, maps, and geography.

Children with autism rarely develop peer relationships. Klin, Jones, Schultz and Volkmar(345) state that autistic children may be interested in social interaction, but their odd social style and 'limited capacity' to understand other's emotion and motivation make it difficult to achieve social interaction.

Autistic children can hardly care about other people's emotion. They may approach an unfamiliar person and say "you're very fat"(Volkmar, Paul, Klin, and Cohen: 313).They may also begin a conversation without providing the listener with adequate background information. Thus, autistic children are socially and emotionally isolated from others.

3. Material and Method

The researcher has chosen "Autism Centre" in Erbil for conducting the field research. The study is done in winter 2014. Ten children are chosen as data for the present study. The children ages range from (6 to 11). They all belong to the middle class. Autism ranges in severity. Thus, the researcher has divided the children into two groups: children with mild autism and others with severe autism disorder. What attracts the researcher's attention is that the centre has only sixteen children which indicates that people are unaware of the importance of the lingual and social treatment and help that the autistic child can get from the centre. The researcher has also observed that all the children are males. This may be due to the fact that "boys are three times more likely to have autism than are girls"(Carlson: 495), or as the children's caregivers state; Kurdish society is a conservative one and girls with autism are not usually sent to the centre, especially when they become teenagers.

The researcher will observe language and social problems which these children have with reference to their behavior and interaction. Later, the language use of these children, their social interaction and behavior will be compared to those of normal children of the same age, gender, and socio economic background. Interviews with autistic children's parents and caregivers are held in "Autism Centre" for extra information about each child. The following table gives information on ten autistic children. The table shows the age, gender, and autism severity of each child.

Case	Age	Gender	Autism Severity
1	6	Male	Mild
2	7	Male	Mild
3	7	Male	Severe
4	10	Male	Mild
5	11	Male	Mild
6	9	Male	Severe
7	7	Male	Severe
8	8	Male	Mild
9	9	Male	Mild
10	7	Male	Severe

(Table 1) Information on Autistic Children.

4. The Results

4.1. Lingual Problems.

Observing autistic children and Holding interviews with their parents and their caregivers enabled the researcher to observe the language use of these children. So, the researcher has reached the following results; some children can speak, others rarely speak, while others stay mute throughout their lives, as shown in the following table.

Case	Speaks	Rarely Speaks	Mute	Notes
1		Rarely speaks		Only at home with his mom
2	Speaks			His case is diagnosed as Asperger syndrome
3			Mute	

4			Mute	
5		Rarely speaks		
6			Mute	Having monologue using unrecognizable words
7			Mute	Having monologue using unrecognizable words
8		Rarely speaks		Has a speech therapist
9			Mute	Never speaks but sings recognizable songs
10			Mute	

(Table2) Speaking Ability

Some autistic children can speak but their speech varies as shown in the following table.

Case	Utters only a single word	Utters words and phrases	Utters sentences	Note
1		Only words and phrases		
2			Utter sentences	While alone
3				
4				
5		Only words and phrases		
6				
7				
8	Only words			
9			Can sing short songs	
10				

(Table3) Speech variation

The researcher has also analyzed the comprehension level of these children, as shown in table 4.

Case	Good	Fair	Very poor
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1	Good		
2	Good		0
3			Very poor
4		Fair	
5	Good		
6			Very poor
7			Very poor
8	Good		
9		Fair	
10			Very poor

(Table 4)

Comprehension Level

The researcher has observed that the chosen autistic children can never hold conversation. They are not interested in speaking. They are more relaxed when they are alone. The chosen autistic children are compared to normal children of the same age, gender, and socio economic background. The following table gives information on ten normal children.

Normal children	Age	Gender
1	11	Male
2	9	Male
3	8	Male
4	8	Male
5	7	Male
6	6	Male
7	6	Male
8	8	Male
9	7	Male
10	9	Male

5)

(Table

Normal Children

Table (6) gives information on normal children's speaking ability.

Case	Speaks	Rarely Speaks	Mute	Notes
1	Speaks			
2	Speaks			
3	Speaks			

4	Speaks			
5	Speaks			
6	Speaks			He is stammering
7	Speaks			
8	Speaks			
9	Speaks			
10	Speaks			

(Table 6)

All normal children can produce single words, phrases, and sentences. Child (6), who stammers, faces difficulties only in producing certain words starting with the glottal stop (?). The comprehension level of these children is also analyzed, as shown in the following table.

Case	Good	Fair	Very poor
1	Good		
2	Good		
3	Good		
4	Good		
5	Good		
6	Good		
7	Good		
8	Good		
9	Good		
10	Good		

(Table 7) Comprehension Level of Normal Children

The researcher could not notice any problems with their comprehension level. The normal children can comprehend what is said to them.

4.2. Social problems.

Impairment in social interaction and behavior	Cas e1	Cas e2	Cas e3	Cas e4	Cas e5	Cas e6	Cas e7	Cas e8	Cas e9	Cas e10
Lack of awareness of others	+ -	+ -	+	+	+ -	+	+	-	+ -	+
Absence of friendship	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Absence of group playing	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
No interest in familiar people	+ -	-	+	+ -	+ -	+	+	-	+ -	+
No interest in new people	+	+ -	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+
No use of facial expression	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
No eye contact	-	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	+
No emotional exchange	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Lack of laughs/ smiles in response to positive comments	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Having repetitive	+	+ -	+ -	+	+ -	+	+	+ -	+	+

behavior										
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The interviews which were held with autistic children's parents and caregivers enabled the researcher to analyze the social interaction and behavior of those children. The following table presents impairment in social interaction, the rating scale is (positive + "the child has the social impairment", negative – "the child does not have the social impairment, + - "the child has mild impairment").

(Table 8) Social Impairment

The social impairment of autistic children is compared to those of normal children. All the normal children are aware of others. They all have friends and play in groups. All of them are interested in familiar people. The normal children are interested in new people except child (6) and child (7) and this may be due to their young age. They use facial expressions when needed. All normal children make eye contact. Normal children can convey their feelings and emotions to others. They also laugh and smile in response to positive comments.

5. Discussion

Concerning lingual problems, the researcher has observed that children with severe autism cannot speak at all, and those with mild autism rarely speak, except child (4) who does not speak. Children with mild autism cannot produce sentences. They only produce words and some of them phrases too. The only exception is child (2) who can speak and that is because his case is diagnosed as "Asperger syndrome" (Carlson: 496), which looks like autism but has no language impairment, nevertheless, he does not speak if he is asked to, just if he wants so. No two children are the same; each one has his own personality and interest. Child (1) never speaks in the centre. He feels shy and scared. Nevertheless, his mother says that he speaks to her at home. Two children with severe autism (6) and (7) have monologues. They talk to themselves using unrecognizable language. Child (6) talks to himself while standing by a mirror. It seems as if he talks to someone and that 'someone' is him. This enhances the idea of "being isolated from others". What attracts the researcher's attention is that child (9) has the ability to sing, though he never speaks to anyone. The autistic children have a speech therapist who helps them produce sound, words, and phrases. Children with severe autism have very poor comprehension level, while children with mild autism can comprehend to a limited extent.

The autistic children are compared to normal children of the same age, gender, and socio economic background. All normal children have a clear language. They can speak fluently except the one who stammers. Normal children are able to produce words, phrases, and sentences. They comprehend what is said to them. Thus, language use is the main factor that distinguishes normal children from autistic children.

Concerning social problems, the researcher has observed that children with autism whether 'severe or mild' lack awareness of others. They cannot build friendship, and they never play in groups. They cannot use facial expressions, and they do not exchange emotion. They also do not laugh or smile in response to positive comments and all of them have repetitive behavior. What differentiates children with severe autism from those with mild is eye contact. Children with mild autism can make eye contact. They are also interested in familiar people, but to limited extent. The caregivers of autistic children in 'Autism Centre' assure that they are trying their best to help the children interact socially. They help them learn how to play together with a ball. They tell the elder ones to catch the younger ones' hands when they return to classroom, but their response varies according to autism severity. While comparing the normal children with autistic children, the researcher has found out that the main factor which differentiates the two groups is social interaction. Each autistic child lives in an isolated world where there is no place for others, while normal children do not want to stay alone. They interact and communicate with others and also participate in social activities.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, children with autism suffer from lingual and social impairment. The speech of children with autism often sounds different from that of normal children. Autistic children with severe autism cannot use language and also have difficulties in understanding what others say. Autistic children are socially isolated from others. Each individual seems to live in a separate world. Unlike normal children who are naturally sociable and are able to interact and communicate with others.

Autism disorder is not curable, but appropriate treatments can help the children overcome life difficulties and carry on their daily needs. Families at first, and then community are responsible for these children. Even if it is hard for them to act like normal children,

adequate treatment and help enable them to live with their lifelong disorder.

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المشاكل اللغوية و الاجتماعية للاطفال المتوحدين

بحث ميداني منجز في مدينة اربيل

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الخلاصة

التوحد هو اضطراب حاد يتسم بالضعف الاجتماعي و ضعف في مهارات التواصل و يتميز بالحركات السلوكية المتكررة⁰ يصيب التوحد كافة الاشخاص من مختلف الاجناس و الاعراق و الخلفيات الاجتماعية و الاقتصادية⁰ يختلف حدة التوحد من طفل الى اخر⁰يركز البحث الحالي على المشاكل اللغوية و الاجتماعية للاطفال المتوحدين في مدينة اربيل⁰ لقد اختار الباحث (مركز التوحد) لانجاز البحث الميداني فيه، و لقد تم اختيار عشرة اطفال كمعطيات للبحث الحالي⁰ بما ان حدة التوحد مختلفة، لقد تم تقسيم الاطفال الى مجموعتين، الاولى، اطفال ذوي توحد معتدل، و الثانية، اطفال ذوي توحد حاد⁰ لقد تمت مقارنة اللغة و التواصل الاجتماعي لهؤلاء الاطفال مع اطفال طبيعيين من الفئة العمرية و الجنسية والاجتماعية نفسها⁰ لقد لاحظ الباحث بان الاطفال ذوي التوحد الحاد لا يستطيعون الكلام و نادرا ما يتكلم الاطفال ذوي التوحد المعتدل، بينما يتمتع الاطفال الطبيعيين بلغة واضحة⁰ ولقد لاحظ الباحث بان الاطفال ذوي التوحد الحاد و المعتدل يفتقدون الانتباه لوجود الاخرين ولا يستطيعون استعمال التعبيرات الوجهية و يعجزون عن تبادل العواطف و يمتلك الجميع الحركات السلوكية المتكررة⁰ ان العامل الرئيسي الذي يفرق بين الاطفال الطبيعيين و المتوحدين هو التواصل الاجتماعي⁰ التوحد هو اضطراب غير قابل للشفاء ولكن العلاج المناسب قد يساعد الطفل على التغلب على صعوبات الحياة و يساعده على تلبية احتياجاته اليومية⁰