

Diagnosing ASD in a child who has Down's syndrome

Some thoughts and information

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Research and our experience talking to many parents of children who have Down's syndrome and additional autism spectrum disorder tells us that almost everyone finds that the additional diagnosis is helpful for two main reasons.

Firstly, it often relieves parents' feelings of inadequacy or worry because their child *'is not like all the other children with Down's syndrome'*. It helps to provide an explanation for their child's functioning and behaviour, as well as pointers to support intervention.

Secondly, it can provide support for access to additional or appropriate resources. It is extremely important for the children who are in a mainstream school, as the ASD may not be recognised, leading to failure to provide the right support with consequences for learning and behaviour.

Diagnostic criteria are the same as for any child. However, we know that the typical profile is somewhat different in people who have the dual diagnosis.

Further information about this can be found in Georgina Warner et. al (2014) study, and in Froelke & Zaborek book, referenced below.

In summary though, some of the social interaction deficits (e.g. eye-contact, responsive smiling, empathic responding) seem to be less apparent (Down's syndrome provides a buffer of social competence) and ritualistic and repetitive behaviours are more significant (a 'double dose' coming from the Down's syndrome phenotype combined with that associated with ASD). Primarily, you are looking for a degree of social impairment that does not correspond with other developmental functioning, regardless of the level of intellectual impairment.

There are no specific tools or questionnaires for the assessment of ASD in people who have Down's syndrome.

So, the diagnostic process will involve a qualitative clinical judgment, based on information collected using tools appropriate for the child's developmental stage.

Although many of the children who receive the dual diagnosis do have a more severe intellectual and communication impairment, we have come across a number of more intellectually able people who have Down's syndrome and are on the autism spectrum.

Standards for autism assessment & diagnosis

- ▶ Based on information gathered from more than one setting
- ▶ Involves direct observation /interaction with the person
- ▶ Uses recognised tools/questionnaires
- ▶ Assessment of cognitive abilities
- ▶ A multidisciplinary approach
- ▶ Results in a report which explains how ASD impacts on the individual, strengths, needs & recommendations for support

Standards for ASD diagnostic assessment of a child/adult with a learning disability

- ▶ Detailed assessment of cognitive level (verbal and non-verbal) and of receptive and expressive language abilities
- ▶ A developmental history covering progress from infancy onwards preferably obtained with a standardised interview (ADI, DISCO)
- ▶ Observations of the child in both structured and non-structured settings (use of standardised instrument such as ADOS can be very informative)
- ▶ Routine screening for medical/genetic conditions
- ▶ Consideration of other relevant psycho-social factors

Patricia Howlin (2000)

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