



Managing an Autistic Patient

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With one in 68 children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the likelihood of a dermatologist seeing a patient with autism is increasing. First and foremost, children with disabilities are no different from any other child and deserve respect and compassion. Unfortunately, for centuries, people with disabilities were perceived as inferior. Blind children were treated as cognitively impaired until Louie Braille unlocked the ability of the blind to read and write. However, nearly another hundred years passed until Helen Keller opened the eyes of the world to the intelligence of not only the blind but also the deaf. Many experts are now recognizing that autism is likely a motor disorder rather than a cognitive one; understanding of autism remains in its infancy.

As a mother of a teenager with autism, I see that rocking, twirling or flicking behaviors may seem odd to those unfamiliar with autistics, however, these actions are akin to the younger child who sucks his thumb. Rather than “self-stimulatory”, I think of the activity as self-reassurance behavior; it is their way of coping with an unfamiliar place. If the patient is rocking, try rocking along as you discuss treatment. I do. The patient and parents feel less isolated. Many children with autism have anxiety due to the inability to communicate effectively. Unexpectedly, they may engage in self-injurious behavior such as biting their fingers or slapping their head. Mimicking bland self-stimulatory behavior shows empathy but ignore all self-injurious behavior. Acknowledging it can be perceived as condescending pity and can cause it to escalate.

Within ASD, there is great variability in perceived function, which has nothing to do with intelligence. Autistics tend to not be attention seekers and often avoid eye contact, however, they are avid listeners to everything, especially when engaged participants in their care. Try not to talk about them in front of them but actually talk to them; tell the child and parent what you are doing next and what you think in your professional opinion can help solve whatever condition you are treating. Solitary steroid preparations are preferable to complicated regimens. Keep things simple; sometimes reassurance and explanation are sufficient.