Parents with autism spectrum disorder

What is the issue?

Raising a psychologically healthy child involves complex emotional interaction between parents and offspring. Parenting also requires the ability to avoid behaviours that might be damaging to a child's well-being. Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who go on to have children of their own may face particular challenges in satisfying these demands due to their difficulties in understanding and relating to others on an emotional level. Their skills as parents may also be hampered by other ASD-typical characteristics such as need for routine and hypersensitivity to certain sensory stimuli.

What does the research say?

To date, there has been very little in the way of formal research into the experiences and needs of families that include one or more parents with an autism spectrum disorder. Much of the published literature in this area is anecdotal or biographical in nature, and is often produced by either adults on the autism spectrum who are themselves parents (such as Liane Holliday Willey), or by the adult children of parents with ASD. A small number of professionals, notably Tony Attwood, have also written on the subject. Their accounts tend to be primarily descriptive and based on a general understanding about the nature of autism as opposed to specific investigative data.

Some of the themes from writings in this area include:

- Parents with ASD frequently experience significant difficulties in understanding their children's expectations. They may show a lack of interest in events of emotional significance to other family members.

- Parents with ASD may impose inflexible routines and strict expectations on their children. They may be quick to criticise and slow to reassure.

- Parents with ASD may spend an unusual amount of time alone and be intolerant of noise and intrusions. Disruptions to their routine may prompt sudden and intense emotional reactions.

- With a combination of acceptance of their own condition and access to appropriate advice and guidance, adults with ASD can become exemplary parents.

- Having a thorough understanding of the nature of ASD may help children in affected families to adjust better to the challenges of parental autism.

- It has been suggested that when a parent and child both have ASD, this may actually improve their ability to understand and relate to each other (Aston, 2005).
In summary

Many people experience parenting difficulties including parents who are on the autism spectrum. Appropriate support for both the parents and the children should be sought when challenges to successful parenting arise.

References


Resources