



Children who are a bit different

It's 5 pm, and 9-year old James is arguing with his mother about doing homework. He says it's too hard and she says that it's not. After all, his teachers say that he's very intelligent, so how can it be too hard? James ends up in tears after a shouting match that leaves everyone in the house unsettled. When it comes to dinner time, James picks through his food and takes much longer than his brother and sister to eat. When asked to prepare for bed, another argument ensues about why he should, or should not, have to go to bed now. He seems "hyped up", unable to settle down, and it's quite late before he eventually finishes his evening routines and goes to sleep. Eventually, James and his parents come to see the psychologist with concerns about his schoolwork "he's not achieving his potential", his social functioning, "he doesn't have many friends, or can't maintain his friendships", his tendency to daydream or lose concentration, "he just doesn't listen", and the endless arguments and temper outbursts that make home-life difficult. It just seems that he's a bit "out of sync" with the rest of the world.

It turns out that there are patterns in James' life that have been there since he was little. He has always been a bit sensitive – he hates loud noises, complains about the labels in his clothes, and is a "picky" eater. He has always been a bit restless, finding it difficult to settle to a task for any length of time (unless it's something on the computer, Playstation, or Gameboy), being a bit distractible, and finding it really hard to wait for things. His mother reports that, while he loves to play soccer and tennis, his handwriting is messy (unless he's really trying hard) and he was a bit slow learning how to manage shoelaces and handle a knife and fork. He also seems to struggle to get his morning and evening routines completed quickly and efficiently. What is only becoming really apparent now is that, while he has very strong language skills and can talk competently about a wide range of topics, he finds maths hard, or battles to organise his thoughts to write stories. These patterns set him apart from his siblings and peers – he seems a bit different.

The profile of strengths and difficulties described here is not as rare as you might expect, and is associated with a nervous system that is "wired" a bit differently from the usual. Children with this kind of profile often have social problems and are somewhat anxious. They may worry about a range of things, or may worry intensely about one particular thing. Those with strong language skills frequently ask questions about their concerns, or "talk themselves through" their activities. In terms of their social functioning, they may have some difficulties with the flow of conversation and activity that takes place in everyday social interaction. They can be "in your face" at times, or seem unaware of other peoples' feelings. One of the really confusing aspects of their behavior is that it can vary from day to day – one day they can do everything they're asked to do and the next day they don't seem to be able to. Their strengths in oral language particularly can lead parents and teachers to have expectations that are unrealistic. The majority of our communication and schooling is conducted in the oral language mode, and it is a really powerful signal for us of a child's abilities. However, just because a child has a highly developed vocabulary, doesn't mean that he or she is able to produce a well-structured story within a particular time-frame.

Each child presents with a variation in this profile, and the difficulties of current concern will change over time. So, for example, sensory sensitivities may be most problematic during early childhood when feeding, washing hair or cutting nails becomes a battleground; inattention and distractibility may become more noticeable when a child is put into a structured teaching environment; specific learning difficulties may become more obvious in middle to late childhood as academic demands increase; motor planning and sequencing problems become more evident as children are expected to become more independent in their self-care. Anxiety may be a longstanding feature, with worry about upcoming events or changes in familiar routines. Social difficulties may appear at preschool with some boisterous or aggressive behavior, or alternatively, withdrawn or solitary play.

A first step is to get to know how the child works in the world. An assessment of the child's intellectual functioning by a psychologist helps to tease out some of the ways that his or her brain processes information, and an assessment by an occupational therapist helps to tease out how the child perceives and makes sense of the information that he or she receives from the world through sensory organs like the eyes, ears, and skin. The psychologist helps to make sense of the assessments and give practical recommendations for adapting the environment to make life easier for the child, and modifying parents' ways of interacting with the child. Importantly, parents might need to stop making assumptions about why the child is not completing homework; doing chores; having a tantrum when asked to put away their toys, or being whiney. While being oppositional may account for some of the behaviors, it's also possible that tiredness or difficulties with remembering and carrying out directions is accounting for the major part. Observing through "fresh eyes" will make a difference to the accuracy of parents' understanding of their children. Putting aside preconceived ideas about what kind of person this child is, or what makes him or her "tick", goes a long way to becoming more aware of how things really are for the child in the world.

The children that we have referred to in this article usually appear to have above average intelligence, and may even be described as "gifted", and that may well be true. However, that does not mean to say that all of their abilities are at the same level. It is surprising to discover that some difficulties with visual tracking (following a line of text across a page); problems of attention or organisation; and struggles with planning and sequencing information or activities can have a significant effect on children's all-round behavior. Differences in abilities can result in frustration for everyone – particularly the children. Self confidence and the feeling that they are capable individuals can suffer as a result of these discrepancies, and sometimes children become reluctant to try things out for fear of failure. Undetected, these difficulties may contribute to negative outcomes in adolescence, such as school failure, mood and anxiety problems, and poor peer relationships. If parents are puzzled by their child's apparently inconsistent abilities or contradictory behavior, taking a new look at the child, and observing just what makes it harder or what makes it easier for him or her will provide clues as to how he or she works in the world.