# Difficulty in Social Understanding for Children on Autism Spectrum

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*Abstract:* **Children on autism spectrum disorder face significant social challenges due to inhibited social skills such as social interaction, holding a conversation, and understanding each other. Hence, parents, caregivers, and who involve in the educational process are left to handle the responsibility of teaching them. They also need extra time and effort to communicate with these children to find alternative ways of expressing themselves and helping them become more independent in the future (Fernell, Eriksson and Gillberg, 2013). The importance of social skills and their significant impact on children's development are apparent. They provide extensive learning opportunities, establish strong communication skills, stimulate cognitive growth and help to avoid social awkwardness (earlyeductionpros.org, 2017)**

*Keywords:* **Social Understanding, Autism Spectrum, Teaching.**

"Difficulty in social understanding is a key diagnostic indicator for children on autism spectrum. Explain how this usually develops in typical children and why it is hard to teach this to individuals on the autism spectrum."

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When children are born, they start to form connections by bonding with the people around. They cry in different tones, wriggles their tiny arms, and legs a signature body language sign as they try to familiarize themselves with the environment. Once the child calms down, he\she starts to talk in a gibberish manner, which is his\her first form of speech. A few years later, the baby grows and develops a mode of communication, which may be verbal and non-verbal. Development of such skills facilitates interaction among people, which foster healthy relationships and social skills. Social skills are essential to human beings, and they are associated with many more skills that infants need to reach developmental milestones (autism.org.uk, 2017).

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be observed to have spread despite it is not being associated with specific cultures, religions, socioeconomic status, or educational level. According to (Salhia et al., 2014), the number of children on ASD in Europe is reported by an average of 18.75 per 10,000 children while in the USA it is stated that an average of 21.6 per 10,000 children. However, China reported a lower average of children on Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which is tabulated as11.6 per 10,000, while in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has an average of 4.3 ASD per 10,000 children. About the average in UAE, this figure is a reflection of how factors such as delay in diagnosis, shortage of specialists in the autism field, the high cost of services, and the social stigma most families fear once they declare that they have a child on ASD (Emiratesautism.ae, 2017). Similarly, Saudi Arabia shares the same culture.

Children on autism spectrum disorder face significant social challenges due to inhibited social skills such as social interaction, holding a conversation, and understanding each other. Hence, parents, caregivers, and who involve in the educational process are left to handle the responsibility of teaching them. They also need extra time and effort to communicate with these children to find alternative ways of expressing themselves and helping them become more independent in the future (Fernell, Eriksson and Gillberg, 2013). The importance of social skills and their significant impact on children's development are apparent. They provide extensive learning opportunities, establish strong communication skills, stimulate cognitive growth and help to avoid social awkwardness (earlyeductionpros.org, 2017)

Working with individuals on ASD as an applied behaviour analysis (ABA) therapist provided me with useful knowledge and understanding of the current situation of autism in Saudi Arabia. Regarding the policies, availability of services, and family's preferences for their children on ASD, made me ponder why we have to push children on ASD to be normal through approaches that seek to normalize children on ASD. For example, under ABA most strategies are there to standardize children on ASD (Padawer, 2017). According to Dr. Damian Milton who has autism himself, he states that the process of making someone less autistic looking in a society is risky, and it might damage them in the end (Birmingham.ac.uk, 2017).

In this paper I comprehensively argued that using different intervention methods to normalize children on ASD tends to harm them instead; it is better to focus on their strengths rather weaknesses. Fundamentally, this paper will be broken down into sections which include defining autism, the current situation of autism in Saudi Arabia, explaining how the importance of social skills, the impact of social stories, the autism right movement and finally a final summary. Further, gathered the required data of this paper, different resources were used, such as books and journal articles, both in English and Arabic, official websites and newspaper websites. To access the data, I relied on Google Scholar, Saudi Digital Library, and journals such as Sage, Elsvier, Eraic…etc. Key words were autism, social deficit, social interventions social skill, social story.

## 2. WHAT DOES AUTISM MEAN?

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex long-term (developmental) disorder that affects social and verbal non-verbal communication skills. It becomes evident within the first three years of a child's life (apa.org, 2017). Furthermore, it can vary along a spectrum from mild to severe (Elsabbagh et al., 2012), which means characteristics of autism may present in diverse ways from severe, moderate or mild (Simpson and Zionts, 2000). Some people on the autism spectrum can finish school years successfully, get jobs, ready to do daily live tasks with different level of support whereas others need great help and support throughout their lives(apa.org, 2017). Understanding and dealing with social context are the main face of autism regardless of IQ (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith, 1985).

## 3. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF AUTISM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Various professionals including therapist and medical practitioners are focusing more on the medical model of disability rather than other models in Saudi Arabia. Mostly, this has increased in the wave of ABA sessions as strategic ways that reduce and modify unfavorable behaviours by using different methods such as reinforcement, punishment, and shaping (Baer, Wolf, and Risley, 1968). The population ratio of people on autism in Saudi Arabia is one per 167(Aljarallah, 2007), while children on ASD is over 167,000. However, no statistical reference can state the exact number of cases of ASD in Saudi Arabia (Alnemary, 2017)Various reasons contribute to this, which include lack of acceptance that a child on ASD has, because of the Fear of social stigmatization make most families shy off from revealing their children who has ASD, lack of autism knowledge, which may lead to misdiagnosis due to its mild symptoms, and lack of specialists who deal with individuals on ASD. Once a family receives the diagnosis of autism for their child, they start to search for affordable specialist services near them, for example, accommodative learning centers, and financial aid to support their treatments and services costs since the specialist services are quite costly and may drain a family's finances. Social and financial constraint make some families travel far away countries in search of treatments and cure or opting for traditional treatment methods such as the use of camel milk or using traditional spiritual healers. Based on the research of services for children on autism spectrum in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia examined the use the services by 205 parents who have children on ASD some of the results were, 58 parents currently using ABA and it is the highest number, which proves the popularity of ABA in the region. Around 46 parents are using vitamins supplement therapy, and only five parents are currently visiting traditional/religious healer (Alnemary et al. 2017). It can be noted that, extensive measures are being done by families who are willing to do anything just to make their child on ASD look normal comparing with other children in his\her age group.

However, some families accept the autism, a good example is Mrs. Nada Nazer who is a mother of an autistic daughter, and the founder of Mommy cares group. It started with 50 families, and by 2014, it had reached over 200 families. The shortage of specialist services for teaching and training parents who have children on ASD motivated the setting up of the Mommy cares group. They focus more on the knowledge that helps them — as parents — to understand their child's world and work more on his\her strengths rather than weakness (Makkah, 2017). They also raise awareness of the new

direction in dealing with autism through workshops, family support, and advocating for rights of children on ASD. The Mommy cares group also suggests that the best therapy for children on ASD is unconditional love.

In western countries, still, the medical model of disability is used to present literature on autism. However, this model focuses on means of reducing the deficits or corrected if possible by strategies and treatment that suggested by professionals (Brisenden, 1986). Under medical model a person on ASD will be trained to pretend to behave normally. For example making eye contact when talking and generalize learning skills out of a therapy session, the process of making people on ASD normal to fit in a society which contains ignorance, and abuses for them, because it affects their self-esteem (Lawson 2008). Supporters for individuals on ASD adopted the new way of viewing autism that highlighted on discover strengths, which lead to broader choices for individuals on ASD in the future. During my study at the University of Birmingham , I had the chance to meet and learn from people who are on ASD, which shifted my perception of autism. Offering such people an opportunity to be productive members of the society is the best intervention options available. For example, in Australia, Dr. Wendy Lawson is diagnosed with autism in 1994, graduated as a Psychologist working as a lecturer in some universities which include University of Birmingham (ASA, 2017 ) and wrote many books one is "Concepts of normality: The Autistic and Typical Spectrum." According to (Lawson, 2008), it is suggested that being tolerant of differences and "celebrate different abilities" in the way of learning, and communication. Maximum benefits can be reaped when one looks at the different concepts and diversity of models as a whole, which means to support each other and to fill the gaps and complete the puzzle.

## 4. IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SKILLS

Social skills are used daily to communicate and interact with people. Additionally, the quality of communication depends on the quality of social understanding. A study in psychological field claims that there is a definite relationship between having practical social skills, feeling content and happy and self-esteem obtained. Poor social skills lead to psychosocial difficulties such as depression, and social anxiety (Segrin, McNelis and Swiatkowski, 2016). The school environment is the best example on this, the explanation is that schools provide indirect opportunities for students to learn how to develop their social skills such as making friends. Improving a person's social skills, enable individuals to reveal different feelings moreover, they can do better in understanding notable emotions of others, and successfully maintaining the relationship in the long term.They can also manage their beliefs that may contrast with others' opinions. Skills such as emotional intelligence allow them to interact socially with people around them because emotions work for communication and social functions. According to (Lopes et al., 2004), positive emotions relate to sociability. Moreover, schools without friendships could create a hostile environment that students would want to avoid. Such hostile environments enhance the feeling of disconnectedness, which could lead to school dropouts. However, it could be the opposite scenario for individuals on ASD. (Lawson ,2008) described his feelings after attending a social event to show the relationship between emotions and his social interactions. He asserted that he experienced peaceful feelings in his own space. Moreover, children on ASD label the social context as incomprehensible and unpredictable (Baron-Cohen, Leslie &Frith 1985). Therefore, the difficulty of teaching social skills for a child with ASD arises because he/she has different perspectives from his\her teacher's attitudes. It is crucial to consider the point view of a child on ASD when employing an intervention (Watts 2008). I concur that for teachers to factor the point view of individuals on ASD in social interactions. This action will permit them to have a better awareness that may lead to positive engagement opportunities for children with this disorder. Equally, the design of the approaches and interventions should be to assist these children to gain better social skills, which may make them more independent.

## 5. SOCIAL STORIES

Social stories are a systematically written scripts serve a specific purpose which prompt children on ASD to understand social context and respond appropriately and acceptable within a society norm (the UK, 2017).  Comprehension of social cognitive skills of ASD children leads to the establishment of social stories as tool and a belief that this understanding must be demonstrated on how we teach social knowledge and skills to children on ASD (Gray and Garand, 1993). Additionally, the main characteristic of autism is social interaction impairments, which needed for social understanding. Social understanding is the ability to read and look through social cues and respond to them. Additionally, these difficulties hurt a person psychological and social wellbeing (Carolgraysocialstories, 2017). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) impaired social interaction and communication' as the main symptoms in the

criteria for the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD; American Psychiatric Association 2013). This highlighted communication difficulties the deficiency of social interaction and in ASD (Hotton, Coles 2016).

Currently, one can use technological evolution to create social stories using iPads app like the Social Story "Creator and Library app "in the apple store, it would be more practical for daily use. The scenario of a social story could be written or recorded as video so they can repeat it if necessary. This approach developed by (Gary 1990) aimed at increasing the social skills and understanding to make children on ASD comfortable and modifying their behaviour for a future situation. It is targeting the age of three years old (Hotton and Coles 2016). Furthermore, many researchers claimed the positivity of this intervention for instance, (Gary1993) emphasized that the effect of social stories enables many children on ASD to be in regular education classes. However, there were some limitations with her claim, the group size was small, and the experimental controls are absent and the intervention (social stories) combined with other methods like prompts (Charman, Stone 2006).

There are many benefits of using social stories which include its portable nature, which allows it to be used in many social settings such as homes, schools, and it is personalized to meet a child's need and a social situation. To develop one, it is essential to consider some factors, which (Gray, 1994) recommended amount of guidelines of implication social stories (1) personalized for the child comprehension level to allow a child to understand it. (2) sentences should vary between (A)descriptive, to highlighted when, where, and why a child should perform the appropriate behaviour, it is essential to identify the social situations, where it take place, who is involved when does the behaviour start and end (Sansosti, Powell-Smith & Kincaid 2004). (B) Perspective sentences, to show other feelings and responds when the child displays the desired behaviour. (C) Positive sentences. (D) Directive sentences, to teach how to perform the tough behaviour. (3) It recommends being the medium length to allowing a child on ASD to focus on one skill. (4) Recognize a child's strength and weakness (Sansosti, Powell-Smith & Kincaid 2004) like, short attention, on the other hand, it based on the power of the individual on ASD, which is visually. Furthermore,(Leaf et al. 2012) noted that some previous research on social stories founded useful when presented the social stories with pictures and images, using different story design for example book format, pages format (Barry and Burley, 2004; Brownell, 2002). Identification of a child's perspective toward a social situation and the difficulties that one faces (Sansosti, Powell-Smith and Kincaid 2004). Allowing children on ASD to understand the desired behaviour, they must skills related and connected to their own experiences(Gray, 1995). Social stories require particular skills, and they may develop differently in children on ASD. Additionally, the theory of mind explains how and when skills like joint attention can apply to typical children on ASD.

## 6.   THEORY OF MIND AND SOCIAL STORIES

It is how people understand and considering others feelings, beliefs, desires when people are interacting with others. Numerous research work in the field of psychology suggested that typical children acquire a theory of mind between ages four and five. However, there are prerequisite skills to develop an approach of mind at infancy (Lowry, 2017). Social engagement among children enables them to interact with others responding, and starting joint attention. From birth, infants can share emotion with their caregivers and imitate expressions. After six months of age, infants established mutual attention behaviour, which happened when infants try to share their objects with other people these conduct require sharing a focus on one purpose, by tracking another person's line of sight (eye gaze) toward other objects and glancing from the object to the person. In this way, infants develop awareness of others visual focus (Sigman 1997). Its attention span helps infants to recognize their environments and understand their behaviour impact on others and to differentiate feeling of others when they are fearful, happy, or angry to perform the proper behaviour (de Villers de Villers, 2014).

However, many children on ASD cannot establish joint attention, which leads to isolation and disconnectedness. By year one, typical infants learn to express their emotions. For example, they can smile when engaging with other people. They are aware of emotional cues, and they can react to others. For instance, if someone laughs at them, they can smile back to them. By the second year, when infants see someone who is upset, they can try to offer help, or provide a comforting object, or remove the annoying items in the surrounding (Sigman 1997). On the contrary, children on ASD cannot express empathy to others in dangerous or bad situations (Joint Attention Test 2017). However, this does not mean they do not have feelings. The truth is that they have difficulties in expressing their feelings and opinions. Consequently, they lack opportunities and social withdrawal. Social stories may assist children on ASD to recognize others emotions, behaviour, and thoughts. In reference to the hypothesis of (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985) that children on ASD lack theory of mind using "Sally and the marble" test (Boucher, 2009) which reflected on impairment of social understanding. Accord-

ing to the characteristic of the theory of mind in children on ASD, Social interaction and understanding can be challenging, unpredictable, and unclear. Employing social stories as a tool to reduce these difficulties by providing information about a situation and explaining why people respond in a specific way, what other's perspective, what expecting from them, and how to cope with unplanned situations like, the absence of the teacher (Ali, Frederickson, 2006). Although it has been recommending to employ social stories for children on ASD because of its effectiveness, (Sansosti, Powell-Smith & Kincaid, 2004) assert that the research on their effectiveness limited. Although, the limitation of experimental evidence of the effects of social stories, the usage of it as intervention increased in schools sittings (Elder, 2002; Yarnall, 2000).

## 7. AUTISM RIGHT MOVEMENT

According to Milton (2014), he highlighted that many interventions and suggestions for children on ASD come from non-autistic professionals. For example, Damian Milton prefers to be autistic, and he does not see autism as a group of behaviour that have to be fixed, as well as, Lawson (2008) who mentioned that, people want to set individual on ASD by changing their behaviours, even they demonstrate autism from the ivory tower. Furthermore, Mills (2013) suggested that the application of intervention should be based on respecting the right of the individual to be different and inspire people to expand their strengths rather than focusing on deficits by this a person can develop alongside with supporting emotional constancy.

Due to the variation of characteristics of children on ASD, family preferences and the environment around them, we cannot generalize that one intervention works successfully with everyone on ASD. Milton (2014) argues that this is a hard question to answer and recommend the employment of different intervention methods. As specialists, we can modify their behaviour and responses to match the norms of the society but, are we able to change their understanding towards social context? However, curing someone from autism could be impossible because autism means the features of viewing the world and how he or she behaves, it is all about their cognition according to (Milton 2014). The new concept of considering autism in general and social competence individually, as a result of a number of an articulate adult on ASD who started to advocate their rights, raised awareness to view their opinions and share their preferences.

Adults with ASD who advocated for their rights are on the right path, as they can raise awareness and share information about their preferences. Some of the rights are the society should accept their differences in learning, behaving, communication, and to value their abilities. The individuals with ASD also need people to support their social understanding rather than expecting them to act normal in a social context (Lawson 2008). That which is reasonable to the ordinary people is not necessarily ordinary to them. Building a society that appreciates all differences will be a useful idea because it will include everyone in their preferences. Supporting them by adjusting the environment around them instead of changing them is advisable. For example, one can teach typical children to be patient with children on ASD when interacting with them. Similarly, understanding the nature of autism helps other people to learn the approaches of communicating with them, which will be useful in reducing the bullying behaviour. Previous research also found that children with this disease like to participate and emulate their friends when the social situation is clear and friendly to them (Field et al. 2001).

Alternatively, there are criticisms towards the right movement as the opposing team argues that, any person on ASD who can express him/herself and wishes not to be cured are those who have Asperger syndrome. This movement ignores individuals who diagnosed with classic autism (Harmon 2004). Moreover, Sue Rubin- the subject of the documentary Autism Is A World, believes a person with Asperger syndrome can communicate very well and "pass the normal" but for others with severe autism who are trying to pass a day without screaming, biting and hurting thus, the concept of curing would be great (Woodgate, Ateah & Secco 2008)

## 8. CONCLUSION

Autism is a public disorder, and it exists on the spectrum which means the degree of the symptoms vary from person to person on ASD. one of the significant signs is the social deficit, thus, teaching children how to communicate is essential, and does not necessarily mean changing them or not acceptance them rather than helping and supporting them to cope with different activities, for example, if a child suffers from any abuses (bulling) and not feeling secure, in this term teaching skills that reach their social understanding and how to communicate using the suitable approach which is meeting their performance as well as their family. In my opinion, learning from different views and collaborate with each other will lead to a great understanding of autism and its various aspects.

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