

Autism, Aspergers, and PDD-NOS: What is in a Name?

Proposed changes to how we label and diagnose spectrum disorders.

Judith Aronson-Ramos, M.D.

Some of you may have read in the news about proposed changes to the system we presently use to classify the different disorders considered part of the autism spectrum including Aspergers Syndrome, PDD-NOS, and Autism. According to the current classification system there are three separate autism spectrum disorders under an umbrella called the Pervasive Developmental Disorders listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual otherwise known as the DSM. This is the current classification in the present edition of the DSM IV:

Pervasive Developmental Disorders

Autism

PDD-NOS

Aspergers Syndrome

Retts Disorder

Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

The current version of the DSM is called DSM IV; in May of 2013 this will be replaced by DSM V. The current revisions of the DSM represent the collaborative efforts of many agencies including the National Institute of Mental Health and the American Psychiatric Association, world experts in neuroscience, genetics, cognition, development and leaders in mental health. The current process began in 1999 and will continue until the process is completed. There have been a series of conferences, white papers, planning groups, and discussion to develop consensus about the changes to the DSM.

One of the proposed changes to the DSM is lumping all of the current Pervasive Developmental Disorders which include: Autism, PDD-NOS, and Aspergers into one group called Autism Spectrum Disorders. Certain disorders currently lumped with this group such as Rett's Disorder and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder will not be included. If these changes are put into effect Aspergers, Autism and PDD-NOS will no longer exist as separate diagnoses but will become one diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder. If this change is put into effect, it will not occur until 2013 and there is still ongoing discussion.

The rationale given for these changes include a few main points. First, there has been a consensus of expert opinion that although the spectrum of autism disorders can be reliably and accurately diagnosed from non-spectrum disorders, differentiation among the different spectrum disorders has been much more difficult and inconsistent. In other words, separating Aspergers, from High Functioning Autism or PDD, etc. has been fraught with difficulties and there has been tremendous variability among professionals. When these distinctions are made, generally they relate to the “severity, language level, or intelligence rather than features of the disorder”. With the proposed new labeling system, Autism Spectrum Disorder would be the diagnosis and there would be specific descriptors of language level, severity and cognition (intellectual ability) for the individual child based on specific abilities and deficits. So, in other words it a child may be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder mild, moderate, severe etc.

Another change is how we classify and describe symptoms. Presently Autism symptoms are broken down into three areas: communication, social functioning, and restrictive and repetitive areas of interest. In the new DSM there would be two symptom groups social/communication (together) and restrictive/repetitive interests (together). There will also be new criteria regarding severity and language level which have not yet been described.

What does this mean for families who presently have children with Autism? Aspergers? PDD-NOS? It is hard to predict but I am hopeful this could lead to improved services, insurance funding for claims, and simplification of school system eligibilities. It may also help in the general public’s understanding of these disorders as part of a spectrum of ability. However things end up, change is inevitable.

To learn more about the DSM you can visit www.dsm5.org where you will find detailed information about all of the proposed changes. You can also contribute to the debate through the website where there is a participant’s forum. For the specific autism changes follow the following link on the site:

<http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=94#>