

The result of traumatizing events on a child with autism.

Should a child with autism be traumatized, intentionally or unintentionally, the effects of such an event could have lifelong ramifications.

Children with autism are readily traumatized by events in their lives. Some events are easily identifiable; such as physical assault or blunt trauma resulting in broken bones. Others are more subtle yet can have the effect of terrorizing the child; such as loud noises [for a child with noise sensitivities] or a barking dog. Others may have touch sensitivities and can be traumatized by 'hugging'.

No matter the cause, traumatic events seem to be etched permanently in the brains of children with autism and all it takes is a situation, sound, smell or other attribute to 'trigger' panic and fear in the child. This is why children with autism are thought to be frequently in a 'heightened level of arousal', i.e., in a 'fight or flight' condition.

Neuroscience has given us a window into why this condition exists and is so long lasting in children with autism.

Recent studies have confirmed that children with autism have very active Amygdalas; the center of the brain that stores traumatic events. This center is directly connected to the brain stem [reticular formation] which is the area of the brain stimulated during potentially threatening conditions and places the child in a 'fight or flight' condition. When a potentially threatening condition is perceived by the Amygdala it sends a message to the brain stem to attack the person, place or thing [with threatening attribution] or to run and flee from the threatening source.

Upon further analysis of the brain activity of children with autism it has been found that the Hippocampus, the center of the brain which stores pleasant experiences, is actually much less active than the children's Amygdalas. This has resulted in a supposition that children with autism are affected more from traumatizing events than pleasant events and that the traumatizing events have greater robustness; thereby maintaining a greater degree of panic and fear in the child than what would be found in typically developing children.

The overt behavior that supports this research is the preponderance of the following behavior in children with autism; protracted temper tantrums to the point of hyperventilation, darting and eloping, flinching, seeking places of solitude, covering ears and eyes, assaultiveness, property damage, self-injury, perseverative speech, opposition/defiance and lack of willingness to engage in new activities [insistence on sameness].

With the aforementioned as foundation the following is an example of what might occur if a child with autism should be slapped across the face out of anger by his parent.

Because such “punishment” is really not clinically/therapeutically applied the child is typically randomly ‘slapped’ when the parent is ‘tired, fed up or generally in a bad mood’.

When the parent is not under such emotional stress the behavior that caused the ‘slapping’ in the first place is not consequated. Because of this randomness what happens for the child is that he sees the parent as having the attribution of ‘threat’ and his level of arousal is heightened whenever in the presence of that parent or in the vicinity of the parent.

Under such conditions the child’s readiness for ‘fight or flight’ is constant and will be debilitating for the child as panic and fear are ever present emotional conditions. Research has supported that such conditions result in symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD} and the emotional debilitation that ensues.

The problem with autism is that such situations are not effectively treatable due to the Amydala’s robustness associated with this developmental disability. Therefore, when traumatized, a child with autism will in all probability carry that trauma throughout his life and will be held captive by any ‘triggers’ that evoke the traumatic event; from smells to sights and sounds as well as settings and people which share attributes of the event.

There are numerous case studies of children with autism having severe behavior challenges when in the presence of people who have attributes associated with an individual who has traumatized them. If this ‘person’ is a man then it is highly probable that men in general will evoke fear and panic in the child; a condition that will have serious consequences as it relates to the child’s capacity to navigate the world at large.

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