

Every Child Can Learn Podcast Episode 5: Autism

- **Intro**

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- **Episode intro**

Glades: Welcome to the fifth episode of Every Child Can Learn, a podcast series about how to meet every child's learning needs - even if they are a little more complicated.

My name is Glades and I work as the Lead Trainer at Backup Uganda. Today, I am joined by Fred. Fred, please introduce yourself?

Fred: Thanks Glades. My name is Fred and I work at Backup Uganda as well, as the Fundraising & Communications Coordinator. In today's episode of Every Child Can Learn, we will be taking you through all the details of a specific learning difficulty called autism.

- **Recap**

Glades: In our last episode we looked at ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) in detail: the definition, the causes, characteristics and how you can help children who are dealing with one of these disorders. In case you missed the episode and you are interested in knowing more about it, please visit our website, www.backupuganda.org, or find them offline at Mega FM, Divine Video & Music Library, Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. Now, let's start with autism.

- **Topic: Autism**

Fred: Autism is usually defined as a developmental disorder that includes difficulties with social interaction, communication, and repeated behaviors. Basically, this means it is a disorder in a child's development, certain phases they are supposed to go through in their development happen more slowly or stop at some point, before they have reached the point that most of us reach. This happens specifically for the ways a child interacts with other people, how the child communicates in terms of speech and nonverbal language, for example, and in different types of

behavior that the child is expected to show. Glades will give you specific examples of this in a bit.

Having autism, or being autistic, does not mean that you can never interact well with other people. It does not mean you are not capable of anything. The moment a child is identified as being autistic, is the moment you will need to start thinking about how to help this child deal with their own condition, and how you can adapt the environment in which the child lives and learns, so that it is supportive for their development. In the end, having a disability or disorder is always a matter of perspective, and it usually only applies to a small number of people within our society. Let's do a quick thought experiment: what if everyone was born without legs and uses wheelchairs to move around, and only a few people were born with legs and have to walk? Perhaps then we would consider people with legs as different, abnormal.

Glades: Just like we have explained in previous episodes, it is always important to remember that not everyone who shows a few characteristics similar to the ones connected to autism, always is autistic. For example, children with autism are often described as children who like to play alone, instead of with other children. That alone is not proof that a child has autism, it always includes multiple characteristics combined.

Before we talk about characteristics, I would like for us to remind ourselves that we have many unhelpful words that are often used to describe children with possible learning difficulties, including autism. Autistic children are often called rigid, tough, isolated, or insensitive, for example. They are often stigmatized, because they seem so different from other children. These terms are not helpful, especially since children with autism also bring a lot of positive characteristics to the table. The purpose of this episode is to help you understand autism better, so that we can all be supportive when we interact with children who are dealing with this disorder.

- **Characteristics (challenges & positive sides)**

Fred: Like any other learning difficulty, Autism as well has signs that help identify its presence in a child, although some children show certain signs more than others. Let's get into the different characteristics so that we are able to easily understand them well. Something that we need to know about these characteristics, is that they are normally noticed when you communicate or interact with the child or when they communicate with others, and they should be seen most of the time, not just once or twice. For some children, their autism is quite severe, and for others, it is more mild. Especially the milder cases are children who often go unnoticed, but we have them in many of the regular classrooms. The characteristics can be put into three different groups that explain the signs that autistic children show. We shall start with the social difficulties.

Social difficulties

- These include challenges with what we call non-verbal behaviour. Those are behaviours that are shown without the use of words, but rather other physical signs. This may include an example like avoiding eye contact. Some autistic children tend to avoid eye contact with people they are communicating with, where they may choose to keep looking up, down and to the sides, yet the person they are talking to may be trying to look at them directly. But, when you talk to a child who is keeping their eyes away from you, let's be very careful to conclude that they may be having autism; a child may be just shy, that doesn't mean they are autistic. Another sign that shows difficulties with nonverbal behaviour might include avoiding touch: many autistic children do not appreciate any part of their bodies being touched. They may dislike it to the point that they get annoyed when it happens to them, for example when you touch their shoulders during a talk or walk.
- Glades: Difficulties with nonverbal behaviour are closely connected to the next characteristic: difficulties with showing emotions and responding to other people's emotions. Children with autism tend to find it hard to interpret other people's facial expressions, for example, which makes it difficult to decide how to react to someone they are speaking with. Some also show limited facial expressions themselves, you may find it hard to see from their face how they are feeling. However, this is not the case for every child with autism. In general though, emotions are complicated for children with autism and especially how to react to them. They may not share their own emotions openly or even be fully able to express what they are feeling. They can be quite direct in communicating with you, regardless of the mood you might be in.
- A third social difficulty is starting and maintaining relationships. Some children with autism find it hard to begin and to keep relationships, whether these are friendships or romantic relationships when they are older. Many feel good being alone, and they may sometimes only have friends for a specific reason. For example, they may be your friend because they see you with a toy of their interest, but they may not keep the relationship with you after they have attained what they want. They also find it difficult to put themselves in someone else's shoes, which means they may not always try to imagine what you want in the friendship or relationship. They may seem selfish, but it is good to keep in mind that this is not because they do not care about you. They just find it difficult to express this.
- Fred: The fourth and last social difficulty relates to sharing interests and achievements. While they have specific interests and they might be incredibly talented in certain areas, they may not take the initiative to share this with you. You may find out in other ways, for example when your child is constantly reading about the same topic, or when their teacher tells you about their amazing performance in a particular subject. Yes, that's right: children with autism do not necessarily perform badly. However, since learning is usually so much of a social activity, that is why they can find it difficult.

Communication difficulties

- The second group of characteristics of autism have everything to do with communication difficulties. A first example of this is slow development of spoken language. Some - but not all, this is very important - children with autism tend to take a long time to learn how to speak. In most cases, they may understand everything you say very well, but take long to start speaking and using some of the words. This is not specific to any language: if a child fails to speak a new language, but speaks the mother tongue, then it doesn't mean they are autistic. However, we do know that most children start speaking their first words before their second birthday. Some children may take a little longer than others, but if, for example, your child is 5 and he or she still barely talks, then it might be worth trying to find out what is going on. It is still important to remember that there could be many reasons for this, autism may just be one of them - this always has to be diagnosed by an expert first. In very severe cases of autism, children may not learn to speak at all.
- Glades: Then secondly, some children with autism may misunderstand the meaning of specific ways we use language. They may not pick up on proverbs, idioms, et cetera, when we say something, but we actually mean something else. They indirectly mean something different, but autistic children will take it the way it is stated, for example “it's raining cats and dogs”, or “this party is on fire”. Children with autism will start looking for the cats and dogs raining outside, or the fire at the party.
- A third communication difficulty is about the words and expressions that children with autism may use. They like repeating the same words and expressions quite frequently. For example, they use similar words for trying to explain something, for instance ‘by the way’..... ‘by the way’.....’by the way’. They will stick to one point and repeat it again and again. Remember, also here: not everyone who does this is autistic, but together with the other signs, it could point you in that direction.
- Number four of the communication difficulties relates to starting conversations and keeping them going. When you talk to a child with autism, it may often feel like an interview. They will answer your questions, but they may not ask you questions in return, or even start a conversation in the first place. They will often wait for you to do this.
- Fred: A final communication difficulty is engaging in role plays. This can be seen during their play time, when they avoid imaginative games, like they do not like playing games of ‘pretending to feed’ a doll, or pretending to be someone else. When we discussed social difficulties, we talked about putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. Even when acting or pretending, children with autism tend to find this very difficult.

Restricted behaviours

- The third and last category of signs of autism are restricted behaviours. A first example of this is that children with autism tend to show the same behaviour over and over again. For instance, they may play with the same toys every time or want to play the same game

every time they get the chance. Another example can be playing with parts of their clothes, like opening and closing buttons of a shirt. Remember, we may all do this sometimes, but children with autism will do it repeatedly.

- Glades: Then secondly, most autistic children find it difficult to deal with unexpected changes. They can be affected by minor changes and they may find it hard to adjust to the way society and life are unpredictable sometimes. They like sticking to schedules, so they get upset with sudden happenings and surprises that they do not see coming and that they did not plan for. For example, when they are in class, they tend to have a particular seat that they always use. If they find someone else in that seat, they would prefer for that person to leave the seat, rather than changing to another seat themselves. If you are shifting to a different home and one of your children has autism, then this child will likely be quite confused and unsettled for a while during and after the moving process. They prefer for everything to stay the way they are used to.
- **Positive aspects**

Fred: Amidst the challenges that children with autism face, they also have specific strengths that we should not forget to talk about, as we appreciate the fact that they have the ability to learn like any other child.

- First of all, as for any society, honesty is an important and acceptable behaviour; autistic children will nearly always tell you the truth and will be honest to you no matter what the circumstances are. They do not like lying, they will always communicate what they think and what they see is right, since they find it very difficult to pretend. For example, when they see you break a cup or plate at home, they will definitely tell the parents the most honest and genuine truth of who broke it. Also, when you put on a dress and you do not appear smart, they will tell you openly that “you're not smart”. This may not always be appreciated by the person they are speaking to, as they may not consider how you will feel about what they say, but in general, we can consider their honesty a positive characteristic.
- In addition, some children with autism are extremely bright and very talented. They usually concentrate on a particular task they are interested in and give more of their time and concentration to what they like most. For example, when they like science as a subject, they will perform it to their best compared to the rest of the subjects taught. We can also look at the situation where they love drawing and come up with exceptionally beautiful drawings. Remember, not all talented and gifted people are autistic, and not all people with autism are gifted or talented.
- Glades: Another positive characteristic relates to the specific interests that children with autism tend to have. Once they are interested in something, they will want to know all the details about the topic, and they feel they can learn more about it without being told to do so. If they are interested in drawing, they will research about the different types of

drawings, artists and how they may improve to make perfect drawings themselves. They thoroughly enjoy this process and can even seem to be obsessed with this particular topic or skill. They will focus to give their point of interest all the concentration that is required, which can help them get extremely good at it.

- Lastly, with the different rules and regulations at school and at home, autistic children most of the time follow set agreements and appointments. If they value an activity they need to do, they can be very good at achieving their deadlines. They will try as much as possible to make it for appointments and they will get frustrated with you if you don't.
- **Causes & myths**

Fred: Now that we have discussed all the characteristics and the positive aspects of autism, there are possible causes and also myths about autism that I want to tell you about. I know that some of these myths can easily lead to bullying at schools and in communities. First of all, as we go through the different causes to this learning difficulty, I want you to take note that parenting does not cause autism. There are children who were well nurtured by their parents and they may still have autism. No individual can be blamed for autism, not the child having it, and also not the people raising this child.

Autism is also not caused by witchcraft. For example, there might be a misconception that autism is caused by a curse from a certain person. That is not the case, and I would advise you not to follow those ideas and avoid being cheated by traditional healers, for example. Autism cannot be cured, but with enough help from home, school, and if necessary, other experts in this area, someone with autism can learn to manage the condition.

Then, thirdly, vaccinations also do not cause autism. This is a myth that is being picked up by parents in various countries, but it is not true. So, I would advise any parent listening to this episode to take their children for the different vaccinations as instructed by the doctors.

What we do know is that autism, just like any other learning difficulties, originates from the brain and how it functions. We also know that it runs in families, a child can inherit it from the parents or earlier generations. Brain development is partly affected by your parents' genes and also by what happens during pregnancy and in early childhood, but that still does not mean that anyone can be blamed for autism. What is still being researched, is what exactly creates this difference in the brain of children with autism. It is a complicated condition that many experts are still researching. They have been able to prove several possible causes wrong, like the ones I just explained, but they have not fully figured out what does cause autism.

- **How to help children with autism**

Glades: As a team, we at Backup Uganda are advocating for everyone to appreciate the uniqueness of every child, which includes understanding and supporting children with learning difficulties. There are many ways parents, teachers and even every person in every community can help children learn and interact at home and at school if they are discovered with autism.

To start with, it is very important that you do not need to force a child with autism to play with others. Instead, ask for their choices and also suggest what would possibly be comfortable for them in their playing time, putting in mind that they often like spending time alone without feeling lonely. For example, they may give the idea of watching TV if it is their area of interest, rather than forcing them to play football with the other children. For the school setting, you could look out for possible play activities that may not force this child to interact with many children. However, that does not mean you should not give them the opportunity to play with others. I just want to emphasize that forcing them may not be the way to go.

Then, as a parent, you can explain to siblings, other children around and even teachers how they can best interact with your child. This will help your autistic child feel loved and understood, and it can help avoid conflicts with other children. For example, you can give them ideas of how they can involve your child in their games without making them feel bad, you can advise them to not touch them suddenly, and of course, to not use stigmatizing words. Teachers will also be able to teach your child better if they understand the fact that your child has autism. And, as a teacher, you can even explain to all your learners how they could best interact with their friend who has autism, without stigmatizing them.

Fred: Whether you are a parent or a teacher, you will make a child with autism feel comfortable if you keep the home and school setting organized. Try using a daily schedule for the family or the classroom and make sure items in the house and in school - including your child's or learner's belongings - each have a specific place. It helps them know what will happen next, and that makes them feel settled. Remember, they generally do not like surprises, so if you have organized a part of your classroom as a play corner, it helps to keep it that way. If you do want to change it, the best thing you can do is first sit down with the child and explain to them what is going to happen. You can even make them part of the process by having them help you reorganize that corner into something else. If you have a specific place in your home where you keep dirty clothes and clean clothes, for example in two separate baskets, do not mix them up or move them to a different place in the house unless you have talked to your child well. If you are shifting from your current home to a new one, talk about it with your child well in advance. It may seem like a small change to most of us, but to a child with autism, it can feel like you have changed their entire world. If you know a big change is going to happen that your child does not expect, talk about it with your child well in advance to prepare for it together.

Then, try to avoid the use of indirect expressions or sarcasm when you are talking to a child with autism. If you use it, they will likely take the different meaning from what the words say. Remember the example from earlier? “The house is on fire” the child will start looking for the fire, or “it's raining cats and dogs” ... the child will look outside to see the cats and dogs falling from the sky. When I say sarcasm, I mean saying something, but actually meaning the opposite. An example can be jokingly saying “It’s so hot today, isn’t it?” when it is actually very cold. This can thoroughly confuse a child with autism, you would rather say exactly what you mean.

Glades: My last tip for you, if you want to help children with autism, is to provide space for them to develop their social skills. Just because they struggle with these, does not mean they can never learn them at all. You can do this with different activities that are related to social interaction and communication. You can start a conversation game, where you say something, and the child can choose an appropriate reaction from different options that you have written for them. You could also practice recognizing facial expressions with them. For example, you can make expressions and ask the child what they are, or you can mention an emotion and ask the child to try and express it with their face or their body language only. You can continuously guide them in playing together with their siblings or their friends, even if they just interact with one person at the beginning. In general, it will always help them if you appreciate their efforts, if you are patient with them, and if you encourage them to keep trying, just like in case of any other learning difficulty.

- **Closing**

Fred: Thank you for listening to our fifth episode of Every Child Can Learn, where we explained in detail the characteristics of autism and the different ways of helping a child with this difficulty, in order to help them learn and address their challenges. We are excited to share with you about behavioural difficulties in the next episode, which involves unacceptable behaviours in the home and learning environments. See you there!

- **Outro**

Glades: Thank you for listening to Every Child Can Learn. Please share your thoughts with us! Join the conversation on Facebook or send your questions to 0772630078. Do you want to learn more about Backup Uganda and stay updated about our activities? Check our website on www.backupuganda.org and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.