

Autism and Children in Bangladesh: Navigating the Challenges and Fostering Inclusion

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Introduction

A developmental disorder that impacts behaviour, social interactions, and communication is known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Autism is becoming more commonplace worldwide, and Bangladesh is not an exception. Its frequency has increased dramatically during the previous 20 years. It is frequently diagnosed before the age of three years. It is characterized by social and communicative dysfunction, with repetitive, restricted, and stereotypic patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities.¹ Children with autism and their families confront many difficulties in this nation with low autism awareness and resources. In order to promote an inclusive society and guarantee that every child has the chance to realise their full potential, it is imperative that these issues be addressed. With this keep in mind, from year 2007, World Autism Awareness Day on April 2nd every year around the world.² This year's 2024 theme was "affirm and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for autistic people on an equal basis with others."

The Scope of the Problem

Bangladesh continues to have a low reporting rate of autism because of societal stigma, a lack of knowledge, and poor diagnostic resources.³ In 2013, a national-level research in Bangladesh utilizing a community-level methodology reported

that the prevalence of autism was 0.15% among a population of 7200 in seven upazilas (Debhata, Wazirpur, Pirgong, Godagari, Pekua, Madhupur, and Kulaura, as well as a city corporation ward in Dhaka).⁴ Another survey conducted by Bangladesh's Ministry of Social Welfare in 2016 indicated that autism accounted for 19% of all neurological disorders documented.⁵

Barriers to Diagnosis and Intervention

The delayed diagnosis of autism is one of the main issues in Bangladesh. Many kids miss out on important early intervention chances because they are not diagnosed until they are old enough to attend school. For children with autism, early diagnosis and intervention are essential since they can greatly enhance their developmental results.

People of developing countries rarely believe that mental illness has a solid scientific foundation and effective therapeutic alternatives. Research done by National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) of Bangladesh indicated that more than around 50% of the rural participants of the study

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trusted traditional healers. Furthermore, they believed that autism and other mental diseases were caused by evil spirits and required a treatment other than drugs.⁶

Social Stigma and Awareness

In Bangladesh, societal perceptions of disability frequently result in social exclusion and prejudice against autistic children. Seeking care is further impeded by the fact that many families choose to conceal their child's illness out of fear of social rejection. Campaigns for public awareness are crucial to altering these attitudes and motivating families to seek support and a diagnosis.

Along with other non-governmental organisations, the Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation has been putting up endless effort to raise awareness and offer assistance. Their reach is constrained, though, and much more work has to be done to dispel stigma and educate the public.

Educational Challenges

In Bangladesh, inclusive education still faces several obstacles. The majority of schools lack the facilities and qualified teachers needed to help students with autism, making them ill-suited to educate students with this condition. Due to the government's inadequate attempts to support inclusive education, many autistic children are either not included in the school system at all or are put in unsuitable environments.

Only a small portion of children with impairments, including autism, routinely attend school, according to a UNICEF Bangladesh research. Their social growth, future job prospects, and academic performance are all impacted by their exclusion from the educational system.

Some Specific Measures

1. **Development of screening tools followed by early intervention:** The Guide for Monitoring Child Development is a tool⁷ is used to assess the development of children who are at risk for developmental disorders or delays. This is a basic tool for low- and middle-income nations, intended for use by non-professional field workers.
2. **Make conversation with doctor:** If a kid is diagnosed with autism, it's important for the doctor to be open and honest with parents about the diagnosis. This helps parents understand how to manage the situation and ensure their child's needs are met.
3. **Establishment of Service Centers for Autism:** To better serve children with autism, Bangladesh government has prioritized autism and neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) in many areas such as inclusion, services, and education.
4. **Professional Training:** Extensive training of staff providing supports, medical staff, educators, community service staff is needed. This training will improve knowledge and attitude towards students with autism.
5. **Parental Awareness:** It is recommended that all couples be informed about the signals and symptoms of autism during pregnancy, so that they look for potential signs of NDD after the child is born.

Finally, support for families is crucial. Providing resources, counselling, and financial assistance can help families manage the challenges of raising a child with autism.

Some Recent Activities on Autism Prevention and Awareness in Bangladesh

In 2011, Dhaka hosted a major international conference on autism and NDD, organized by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), the World Health Organization (WHO), and Autism Speaks. Bangladesh has already established the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013, the Neurodevelopmental Disabilities Protection Trust Act 2013, the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Council Act 2018, and the Integrated Special Education Policy 2019, establishment of the National Steering Committee for Autism and NDD (NSCAND) in 2012. With these, two online applications were created: "Bolte Chai" and "Autism Barta".⁸

Conclusion

Children with autism in Bangladesh deserve the same opportunities for growth, education, and social inclusion as any other child. By addressing the existing challenges through increased awareness, better diagnostic and intervention services, educational reforms, and family support, Bangladesh can create a more inclusive society that values and nurtures the potential of every child.

The journey towards inclusion is long, but with concerted effort and commitment, significant progress can be made. It is time for Bangladesh to embrace its children with autism, ensuring they too can contribute to the country's future.

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