

Proposed Changes to the ASD Diagnosis: A Review of Implications for Early Childhood Programs

A new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) is currently in development to replace the existing DSMV-IV. One of the changes proposed is in the diagnostic criteria for autism and related conditions. The DSM-5 proposes one diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for all conditions with new criteria. The new definition of ASD requires a child to meet four criteria including: deficits in social communication and interaction; restricted and repetitive behaviours or interests; appearance of symptoms in early childhood; and limited daily functioning as a result of the conditions.

Diagnosis of disability is a complex and it becomes more complex when the criteria change. For families who have a diagnosis of Autism or ASD, the change may affect access to services and the degree of inclusiveness that they experience in educational setting. For some, the experience of being “labeled” with a disability raises concerns about stigma and discriminatory attitudes that may come from the designation.

In child care settings, a diagnosis is not necessary for children to get resource supports. When children have behaviours that are perceived as unacceptable, or developmental concerns, the early childhood educators should assess the program and the needs of the child to maximize the benefits of the program for the child. Ideally, the change in definition should not affect children’s access to early childhood programs and supports if they are getting supports that are based on their individual characteristics, rather than diagnosis. However, most parents report that getting a diagnosis is extremely helpful for a number of reasons. The diagnosis explains their child’s development and behaviours and can confirm their concerns. The diagnosis can give information so that parents are able to support their children better. But perhaps most important is that the diagnosis can help parents to advocate for supports.

Families report that getting a diagnosis is helpful to them as they navigate the system of services from health, social services, education and early childhood education as a group. The majority of supports that children with disabilities are accessing are not directly through a child care centre. Many of these families are being re-assessed with each service agency. While child care resource supports do not require a diagnosis, this is not the case for other specialized services. It is important for the early childhood education sector that families have access to the wide range of services that are available because these agencies support the child, their family, and child care centres. Child care centres that have a number of supports both within the Centre, and from community-based agencies, are more inclusive (Irwin, Lero & Brophy, 2004).

The risk with the change in the definition of ASD is that some families will no longer be recognized as having rights associated with disability categories. All Ontarians have the right to accommodation on the basis of disability and a diagnosis allows parents to more readily claim these rights. As an example, one of the most common reasons for children to be asked to leave an ECE setting is because of their behaviours. If a child has a diagnosis of autism, the parents can use this diagnosis as leverage to get supports rather than being excluded from the service.

The need to have a diagnosis or designation of exceptionality in school settings, illustrates the problem. While it has never been a requirement that children be designated as having an “exceptionality” in order to receive special education supports, in practice many children have been denied support on this basis. The Ministry of Education recently addressed this issue in a memorandum to the Directors of Education, clearly stating that a designation or diagnosis is not necessary to receive support where a demonstrated learning need exists. The memorandum explicitly referenced ADD/ADHD which is not named in the Education Act in reference to any category of exceptionality.

Overall, the new definition of ASD is easier to recognize and is perhaps more accurate in capturing the condition. However, the changed definition may result in some additional children being diagnosed, and some children being excluded from the diagnosis. It is important that early childhood educators and resource consultants do not use the diagnostic criteria to exclude children from an accessible early learning experience.

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References:

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- American Psychiatric Association (2012). *DSM-5 Development*. Available online <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevision/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=94#>

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