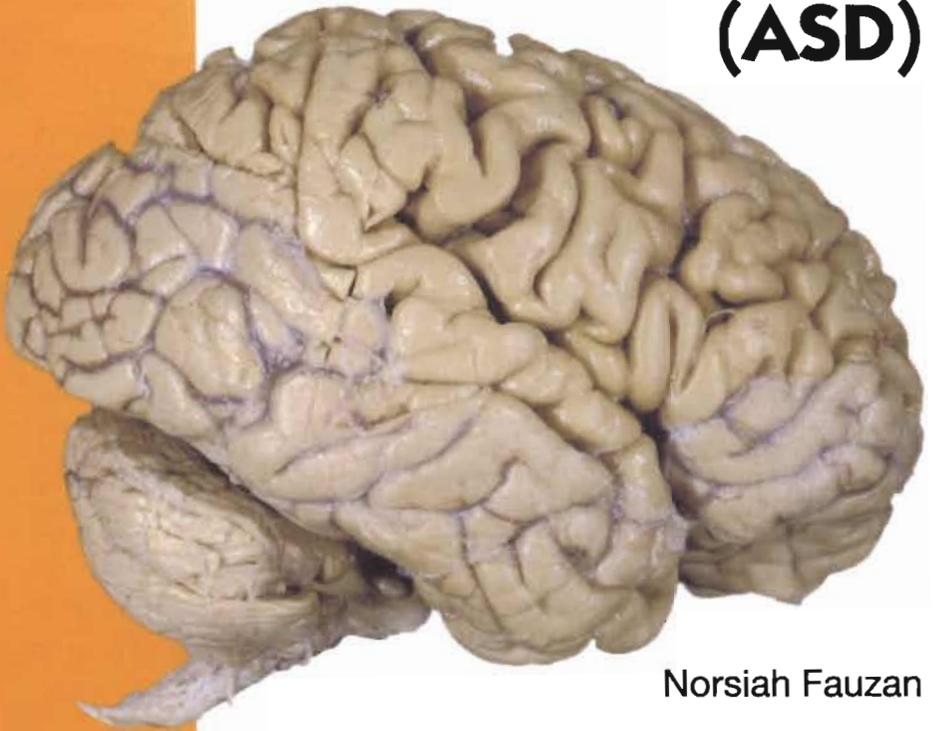


Theory of Mind Deficit in Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)



Norsiah Fauzan



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Foreword

The autistic spectrum includes a range of disorders, the most common being autism (also known as Autistic Disorder), and Asperger Syndrome (also known as Asperger's Disorder). Even though these disorders share common features, the severity of symptoms vary in each individual across a spectrum of cognitive, social and communicative abilities and behavioural patterns. The pattern and extent of difficulties in their behavior may change over time. Social relationship, communication and interaction difficulties are generally considered to arise from 'theory of mind' issues (Frith & Happe, 1994; Baron-Cohen, 1995).

Theory of mind relates to difficulties with social perception; that is, understanding situations from another person's point of view, or having a different perspective on many social situations. It's the deficit of theory of mind that can be used to explain the social and communication impairments in individual with autism spectrum disorder, thus explaining why children or individual with ASD tend to be less proficient in reading people's mind compared to typical people. This deficit is unique to those with autism and regardless of where an individual may fall with the spectrum, they exhibit this deficit which is essentially a lack of understanding that others have such as their own thoughts, feelings, plans, and points of view resulting in difficulty in comprehending and expectation of others and inability to expect what others will say and do in social situations. In typical developing children, the 'theory of mind' development occurs from the age of 3 to 4, but in individuals with ASD the mental understanding continues to be conspicuously absent throughout their lifespan and leads to significant social and communicative challenges.

In Malaysia, it is difficult to estimate confidently the number of people with ASD in a given population. The recent international research (Fombonne, 2005; Fombonne & Chakrabarti, 2005) suggests that the best estimate for the prevalence of all autism spectrum disorders is 6 per 1000 people. It is probable that the demand on available diagnostic and educational services for students with ASD will increase because there remains in schools a large number of students with autism who are yet to be diagnosed.

Many autistic students are participating at their local school with or without a diagnosis. There are lack of professionals (e.g speech therapist, educational psychologists) or specialized teachers trained in this area. Some of the diagnosis were conducted by the medical doctors or child psychologist in the general hospital. Some receive minimal support in terms of extra assistance with organisation, curriculum or social skills development and the affordable ones receive more intensive support for areas of identified need, such as communication and language disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavioural support and mental health problems.

Autism and Asperger's syndrome are present very early in a child's development and usually have lifelong effects on the development of social relationships, community participation and education. The cause for autism is unknown and, while there is no cure, there are treatments and strategies that are effective for improving the lives of children with autism. This book will provide a discussion on the importance of routine screening, screening guidelines, diagnosis for ASD children and management of autism using various treatment and therapies. Most importantly, the parents, teachers, counselor and the school society will be well aware that managing autism at an early stage can make an enormous difference to the capacity of every child to achieve their potential in life. By being better informed, and making connections with families and support services in our communities, you are better equipped to guide, teach and enable each child to have a better start. This book is designed to help you support children in your classroom who have been identified with Autism and Asperger's syndrome disorder.

Central to the practical advice and information in this book is the recognition that you are not alone. It highlights the value of making connections and partnerships with families, agencies and your colleagues to foster conducive learning environment and learning opportunities. In short, this book may help you to increase your understanding and knowledge, begin planning for your student, enable you to make connections with further resources and people who may be of help.

It's my pleasure to express my gratitude to Dr. Norsiah Fauzan for her contribution and enrichment in the field of Special Education and ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) through the publication of this book. Finally, my appreciation goes to the many people and agencies who have contributed in the best interests of every child.



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