

## THE ISSUES OF DIAGNOSING FEARS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

### AUTHOR'S DATA

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### ABSTRACT

Fears typical for children with autism of certain age groups is expressed and experienced with various levels of intensity. In addition, the context of overcoming those fears may vary as well. These factors, unfortunately, are not always taken into consideration when organizing and conducting psychological work with children with autism to overcome their fears. Thus, outside this specificity, it is quite natural to assume that psychological work with children will not be predictable and effective.

**Key words:** fear, overcoming fear, neurotypical development, developmental disorder, anxiety, psychological work, diagnostic methods.

### INTRODUCTION

Much attention has been paid to the problem of the fears of both neurotypical and children with various developmental problems in psychology, but the methods of overcoming them mainly take into account the characteristics of the fears of children with neurotypical development (Scahill et al., 2019; Kerns, Renno, Kendall, Wood, Storch, 2017).

The developmental disorder is also reflected in the child's emotional level, as a result of which even the manifestations of fears characteristic of a given age have their own characteristics, both in the frequency and nature of expression and in the ways of coping (Simonoff et al., 2008). This circumstance is not always taken into account in the process of organizing the overcoming of the fears of children with developmental disorders, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of relevant activities.

The process of identifying the fears of children with developmental disorders is often more complicated due to a number of features of mental development, including features of the cognitive and emotional spheres.

From this point of view, we were interested in the question of whether these features did not prevent the methods used to diagnose and overcome the fears of children with neurotypical development from using effectively in working with children with developmental problems, in particular, with autism.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE TOPIC**

Currently, psychologists working in psychological centers and preschool institutions implementing inclusive education face the problem of forming appropriate concepts and approaches to overcoming fears, which can be effectively applied not only in the work with children with neurotypical development but also in the presence of developmental problems.

Meanwhile, programs and methodological guidelines aimed at overcoming the fears of children with developmental problems have not been developed for these specialists, which in turn complicates the work of specialists.

Psychological science has accumulated a fairly rich experience in the use of various methods for the purpose of psychotherapy of children's nervous, mental and physical disorders, but they lack developed and experimentally substantiated systemic programs for overcoming fears for children with developmental disabilities. Moreover, some methods used to overcome the fears of children with neurotypical development often have low effectiveness in the process of overcoming the fears of children with developmental problems (Sharma, Hucker, Matthews, Grohmann, & Laws, 2021).

As it have been already mentioned, a number of features of the mental development of children with autism make it difficult to identify and overcome their fears (Mayes et al., 2013).

Through a socio-psychological survey conducted by us, we found out the awareness and appropriate approaches of psychologists working with children regarding the features of fear manifestation in normal and pathological development, diagnostic and overcoming works. 30 psychologists participated in the survey.

Among the typical fears of children with autism, 52% of specialists identified such fears as fear of strangers, loud noises, animals, closed space, open space and objects with a certain quality or color.

In order to identify fears, 53% of specialists used "Fear in the cabins" and "Draw fear", 33% used "Incomplete sentences", "Draw a house, tree, person" methods, and 13% - distinguished the "Thematic Perception Test".

Only 53% of specialists indicated that they use the same methods with children with autism, while 67% of the psychologists interviewed by us attributed low effectiveness to them, and only 27% stated that the methods of identifying the fears of children with neurotypical development are also applicable in working with children with autism.

Only 7% of the respondents considered the methods used with children with neurotypical development unacceptable in working with children with autism.

More than 40% of the specialists interviewed by us emphasized the observation of the child's behaviour and the conversation with the parents in the diagnosis of fears in the presence of autism.

Interestingly specialists also admit the low effectiveness of the methods used to diagnose and overcome fears of children with neurotypical development, and yet, in practice, they do not have the opportunity to replace them with other, more adapted methods.

It is believed that the problem is also complicated by the fact that the causes of the fears of children with autism may remain unclear and unknown to those around them, manifest even in relatively neutral situations, and the poorness of external manifestations of fear or inconsistency with the specific situation, in our opinion, may act as a result of the isolation mechanism, not reflecting the true intensity of the fear experienced by the child.

As a result of the unique perception of the world around them, the experience gained by children with autism and the content and forms of their relationship with the world can be very different, which often explains the presence of sociophobia, generalized (widespread) anxiety and, of course, anxiety disorders characteristic of the person with autism (Kerns, Renno, Kendall, Wood, Storch, 2017).

The fears of these children are often reflected in their stereotypical interests and addictions, manifest in all kinds of phenomena, objects and situations (wallpaper decorations, door or cabinet handles, objects of a certain color or shape, certain sounds, open or closed shelves and doors, etc.). However, as the results of surveys and conversations with psychologists showed, the adults around the child often cannot imagine that these behavioral manifestations are closely related to their underlying fears.

For example, 5.1-year-old Nare, being afraid of the sound of the vacuum cleaner, constantly turns it on herself, and 4.9-year-old Eric, being afraid of the cartoon character (spider-man), constantly watches the specific part of that cartoon and repeats his actions that he was scared of.

In both of the described cases, the children themselves initiate the meeting with the object of fear, but at the same time, they display such behavior that indicates an adverse psychological condition, emotional tension, anxiety (they cover their ears, cry, express displeasure, complain, constantly repeat self-stimulating movements and actions, etc.).

The generalized anxiety characteristic of these children is especially aggravated in new situations, in the case of the need to change stereotyped forms of communication and changes in their demands. The increase in anxiety in some children is expressed by movement anxiety, agitation, and in others by restraint, the emergence of clingy actions.

A child with autism has a certain sense of symmetry that extends to the world around them. He is loyal to his spatial ideas, and if something suddenly changes in them, then the child begins to

feel fear. In this case, the child reacts with chaotic behavior expressing general anxiety, not to a specific thing or any of its properties, but to such situations in which the conditions that have become usual for him, the behavior and reactions of a familiar or close person undergo certain, even the smallest changes (Manukyan, 2017).

It is possible to assume that at the unconscious level this fear is related to the danger of losing the projected image of the surrounding social world. In other words, the fear of a child with autism is formed as a result of the feeling of helplessness in the new spatial and temporal reality and the lack of behavioral adaptation models in that situation.

In other words, children's fears in this case form stereotyped actions and often limit their communication with the surrounding world, prompting them to avoid negative emotional impressions and clinging to primary forms of activity.

In our opinion, in this case, the forms of protection from the surrounding world are brought to the fore, they are also reflected in the child's physical rejection of fear-inducing impulses, the tendency to remove them from his body as much as possible, and therefore also to weaken its influence as much as possible.

The distortion of the body-emotion connection of children with autism is most clearly reflected in self-stimulation, with which the child tries to silence the unpleasant impulses of the surrounding world. We believe that this circumstance once again emphasizes the need to make appropriate changes in the process of psychological work aimed at diagnosing and overcoming fears in autism.

Diagnostic methods aimed at identifying the fears of children with neurotypical development are quite developed and repeatedly tested, while the level of development and testing of diagnostic methods for the fears of children with developmental problems, including autism, is not satisfactory (Manukyan 2017, Scahill et al., 2019).

This problem is relevant today, and several studies conducted to overcome the problem (Scahill et al., 2019; Sharma, Hucker, Matthews, Grohmann, & Laws, 2021) witness that the methods used to overcome the fears of children with neurotypical development are often not only effective for children with autism but in some cases are not applicable at all.

As our research has shown, specialists working with children have serious difficulties with this problem, since the methods of diagnosing and overcoming the fears of children with neurotypical development do not take into account the peculiarities of the cognitive and emotional spheres of children with autism, their self-perception, and their relationships with the surrounding world.

It is strongly believed that it is ineffective to mechanically transfer the diagnostic methods developed for children with neurotypical development to work with children with developmental problems.

It is necessary to complement them with auxiliary and experimentally based diagnostic methods that take into account the specifics of the mental development of children with developmental disorders.

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