



Autism and Moral Development

What can the Sandy Hook School shooting teach us?



Michelle Hartley-McAndrew, MD, FAAP
Clinical Assistant Professor of Pediatric Neurology
Medical Director,
The Children's Guild Foundation Autism Spectrum Disorder Center
Women and Children's Hospital of Buffalo



WHAT HAPPENED?




Sandy Hook Elementary Victims




BREAKING NEWS


SHOOTING AT CONNECTICUT ELEM. SCHOOL
Mayor: at least 3 victims at hospital; condition "very serious"





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- Moral- comes from the word *moralis* which means of or relating principles of right or wrong behavior
 - To act morally, one must not only know the difference between right and wrong, but also conform to the standard of right behavior



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- Kohlberg describes 6 stages of moral development:
 - 1) Moral actions in order to avoid punishment
 - 2) Moral actions as an act of self-interest
 - 3) Moral actions as they begin to care about the impact of ones actions on relationships and society
 - 4) Moral actions because they understand that laws and conventions are important to the functioning of society
 - 5) Moral actions because they are driven by what advances life, liberty and justice
 - 6) Moral actions that may supersede any unjust laws in the interest of greater truth and universality

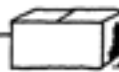
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- As we further look at moral development, it is suggested in the Social Domain theory that children require social experience with their peers, teachers and siblings to form their social knowledge of morality.

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- In 2003, a study by Hippler & Klicpra studied 177 cases originally diagnosed by Asperger and found no raised incidence of criminal offences compared with general population rates.

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- In one study by Blair, the ability of children with autism to judge moral vs. “conventional” transgressions was compared to typically developing children.



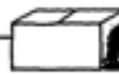
this is Sally



this is Anne



Sally puts her ball in the basket



Sally goes away



Anne moves the ball to her box





where will Sally look for her ball?





- Moral stories:
 - A child hitting another child
 - A child pulling the hair of another child and the victim crying
 - A child smashing a piano
 - A child breaking the swing at the playground


- Conventional stories
 - A boy wearing a skirt
 - Children talking in class
 - A child walking out of the classroom without permission
 - A child who stops paying attention and turns their back on the teacher

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- They found that despite their difficulty with theory of mind tasks, children with autism were equally able to make moral and conventional distinctions for all questions presented to them.


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- In a separate study by Blair, they investigated the autonomic and psychophysiological responsiveness of children with autism to facial expressions of sadness by examining their skin conductance responses to visualizing this expression
 - Children with autism showed greater skin conductance with distress cues than to neutral stimuli.
 - This is in contrast to those with sociopathy or psychopathy who lack the autonomic and psychophysiological response to the distress of others

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- A further study was conducted to determine whether these autonomic responses were a “knee jerk” response to seeing someone in distress or crying in the absence of moral reasoning by introducing a “cry baby”
 - They found that children with autism had an appropriate response to distress cues that involved moral reasoning and once again, they did not perform well on theory of mind tasks.


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- In research into Callous Unemotional personality/psychopathy, the defining characteristic of the disorder is a lack of empathy and remorse, despite perfectly good understanding of other's thoughts and feelings.
 - This lack of empathy along side good general mentalizing (understanding theory of mind) is proposed to enable psychopaths to manipulate people to their own ends, commit premeditated crime and remain unaffected by their appalling deeds.


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- In a study by Rogers et al. in 2006, they found that callous antisocial behavior in ASD does not appear to result from those cognitive deficits that are core to autistic disorders
 - Instead callous traits and behavior in a small number of individuals with ASD probably reflect a cognitive “double hit” involving impaired empathic response to distress cues which is not part in parcel of ASD itself.
 - The social impairment present in ASD is distinct from that present in psychopathy

Rogers J, et al, 2006


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- “These results if replicated, suggest that reports and concerns about ‘chilling’ nasty behavior in a young person with ASD should not be dismissed as ‘just part of the autism/Asperger syndrome’, but taken very seriously for separate assessment and intervention” p. 1797

Rogers J, et al, 2006

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- Children with autism spectrum disorders may have a concurrent psychiatric disorder just as those in the general population
 - Rates of psychiatric comorbidity are often unrecognized clinically and can be challenging to diagnose because it is difficult for individuals with autism to describe their mental states and experiences.

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- Rates of co-occurring psychiatric disorder in children with autism were approximately 72%
 - The most common were ADHD, Specific phobias, OCD
 - Only 7% met criteria for oppositional defiant disorder
 - “Many children with autism do not understand the concepts of spitefulness, vindictiveness and intentionality including deliberately annoying others and blaming others for one’s behavior and mistakes”

Volkmar & Cohen, 1991

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- Accurate and reliable diagnosis of a comorbid psychiatric disorder is imperative in order that those might receive proper treatment
 - Clinicians who are not familiar with autism spectrum disorders may think many of the behaviors are secondary to the autism features themselves, however, this is not the case
 - It is important to be knowledgeable about the features of autism such that one can understand where the behaviors of autism end and the features of another mental health disorder begin

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