

## Editorial: Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Importance of Early Assessment and Early Interventions

Various research studies emphasize the importance of early childhood screening and the necessity of early identification of developmental problems among young children [1, 2]. With the inauguration of the DSM-V a new category of disorders was defined under the name “Neurodevelopmental Disorders”, which includes: Intellectual Disability, Communication Disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Specific Learning Disorder, Motor Disorders and Other [3]. Combining all these disorders in one category indicates the idea of early onset conditions that tend to diminish with age but remain persistent throughout individual’s lifetime.

Early screening and psychological assessment in clinical practice of at-risk infants is important for the purpose of prevention of the aggravation of the neurodevelopmental disorders through early diagnosis and early interventions [4]. This involves the implementation of comprehensive measures and instruments that provide the opportunity for elaboration of complex individual profiles of psychological functioning [5].

The first article (***Early Assessment of Mental Development in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other Neurodevelopmental Disorders – Sharing of Clinical Experience***) presents our experience working with children with neurodevelopmental disorders and their families. We share our clinical observations and thoughts about the importance of psychological assessment as a base for the development of future therapeutic programs for stimulation of the development. We introduce a toolkit that we have used for over 15 years [6]. It is used for detailed assessment of the cognitive, socio-communicative, sensorimotor and social-emotional development in the age range of 0 to 24 months. We compare the typical profiles of children with ASD to those with others neurodevelopmental disorders. The comparison is useful for differential diagnosis and allows for an earlier diagnosing of children. We also share our observations and open a discussion about the specific behaviors of parents and children with ASD, which we encounter in our daily work.

In the second article (***Assessment of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Post-Assessment Meeting with Parents: Some Issues of Planning and Professional Attitude***) we present some important issues related to our working approach to parents of children with ASD in the processes of assessment and especially in post-assessment meetings between the parents and the assessment team. The degree to which parents make use of assessment outcome depends at least partially on the assessment team capacity to attune to them during the period of assessment.

The reason for referrals and the comorbidity in a sample of children and adolescents diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) in our unit is the focus of the third presentation (***Asperger’s Syndrome in a Clinical Sample: Reasons for Referral and Comorbidity***). These children exhibit clearly different pathway to diagnosis; the diagnosis is not considered prior to assessment and in some cases the referral is motivated by a comorbid condition. This article elucidate the reasons for referral, the frequency and the kinds of comorbidities in a clinical sample of 24 children and adolescents with AS patients of the day-care department of the Clinic of Child Psychiatry St. Nikolas. The mean age at the time of assessment and receiving diagnosis was 9.6 yr (age range 4 to 17 years). Findings are discussed in terms of the importance of the well-known problems with the reliability of AS diagnosis, the developmental perspective and comorbidities. Comorbid conditions identified at the moment of assessment include ADHD, Obsessive-Compulsive Behaviors, Stereotypic Movement Disorder or Trichotilomania. The authors suppose that the existence and severity of some comorbid disorders is related to the individual’s age and they could be differentiated after specialized multidisciplinary assessment.

The fourth article (***Assessment of Intellectual Functioning among Children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Challenges and Implications Beyond the Clinical Practice***) highlights the importance of providing “ad-hoc”, comprehensive and high-quality assessment of intellectual functioning of children with neurodevelopmental disorders (the majority of whom are classified as “children with special educational needs”), for the purpose of early identification of cognitive deficits and elaboration of effective individualized support measures. Traditional approaches and instruments for assessment of intellectual functioning are discussed alongside with novel practices emerging in the field. The authors offer some important insights to the practical implications and

challenges in the process of intellectual assessment for the benefit of clinicians, educators and other professionals involved in long-term support of children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

The fifth text (***Child Welfare Reform in Bulgaria – from Institutional to Family-Based Community Care: Engaging with Families, Children and Colleagues?***) presents the transformation of services for children and parents in Bulgaria as a relational context for child care provision. The authors, a team representing Clinic of Child Psychiatry “St. Nikolas”, University Hospital “Alexandrovka”- Sofia, and the Know How Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University - Sofia, discuss their experience in the deinstitutionalization of children's services in the country – a process that addresses the professional attitudes inherited from the socialist years, namely – the culture of isolating the client, intrusion in the family life, limited and hierarchical style of communication within and between sectors.

This special issue introduces the topics of early screening, diagnosis, intervention and policies for prevention of disorders in children. It emphasizes the importance of including early screening for ASD and other neurodevelopmental disorders in the work of primary care doctors and pediatricians. The issue aims at opening a discussion about the importance of the above topics and the holistic approach in providing care for children as well as the necessity for collaboration between different child institutions, experts and parents. We provide multidisciplinary viewpoints through the participation of child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers. Other professionals not presented in this issue are educators and speech therapists. However, their work is an important part of the process of stimulating child development.

In closing, we would like to emphasize, that the aim of this special issue is to start a discussion and open up a dialogue about uniting the efforts of all those professionals involved in the care of children with neurodevelopmental disorders, emotional and learning problems and other mental disorders. It is important that we develop a common language and to adhere to the same standards in order to better serve the needs of each individual child.

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