

Autism expert on proposed changes to autism diagnosis

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(Medical Xpress) -- Autism has been the subject of much discussion recently due to [proposed changes in diagnostic criteria](#), as laid out in the forthcoming fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). These proposed changes would collapse three current diagnoses – Autistic Disorder, Asperger Disorder, and a diagnosis called PDD-Not Otherwise Specified – into one diagnosis. This change has led to concerns about how individuals with these previous diagnoses, as well as individuals who have yet to receive a diagnosis, will be impacted.

Morton Ann Gernsbacher, the Vilas Research Professor and Sir Frederic Bartlett Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an expert on [autism](#) and psycholinguistics says that one reason these diagnostic changes have been proposed is because diagnosing Asperger syndrome is often difficult. “For example, a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome requires documenting that the individual didn’t have a very early delay in using language. But many adults needing diagnoses don’t have detailed language development documentation from their infancy,” she says.

Applying the current diagnostic criteria for Asperger syndrome to children can even be tricky. Gernsbacher references a recent study of over 2000 children in various locations around the U.S. which showed that fifty well-trained professionals disagreed in their use of Asperger syndrome diagnoses. This study also showed wide disagreement in the use of the [diagnosis](#) of PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified).

In a [2005 report](#) in Current Directions in Psychological Science, Gernsbacher and her co-authors, Michelle Dawson and H.H. Goldsmith, presented three reasons not to assume that the increases in autism diagnoses are due to an unknown autism epidemic in the United States. They demonstrate how the rise in autism diagnoses over the last couple of decades could result from broadened [diagnostic criteria](#), uptake of autism as a special education category, and greater public awareness.

Amid the public debate over the proposed changes to the DSM, Gernsbacher strongly believes that any individual who needs support, accommodations, or services for his or her disability should have access to those accommodations and supports. “I hope that the new DSM-5 criteria don’t make that more difficult,” she remarks.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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