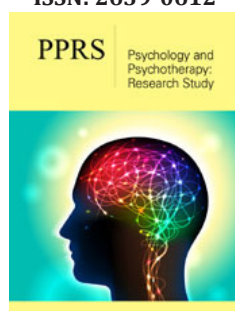


# The “Undiagnosed” Autism Spectrum Disorder: Need for Support in Adolescence to Prevent Secondary Disorders in Adulthood

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## Abstract

The characteristics of the ASD spectrum encompass a range of attributes that blur the distinction between the concepts of “Normal” and “Abnormal,” thus forming a continuous spectrum. While signs of developmental disorders are most evident during childhood, they become more intricate in adulthood due to interactions with the surrounding environment. Diagnostic challenges arise from insufficient information during childhood, particularly in individuals with average cognitive abilities. Patterns of ASD that have not been fully confirmed are marked by challenges in social interactions, exhibiting a greater prevalence among females. Some studies suggest the presence of a Pervasive Autistic Phenotype (BAP) within the families of individuals diagnosed with ASD. Despite Japan’s implementation of legislation prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities, students not diagnosed with ASD may not have access to the necessary support. Establishing an adequate support system in schools at an early stage, including adolescence, is crucial to mitigate the accumulation of trauma and the development of secondary mental disorders.

**Keywords:** Abnormal; Undiagnosed; Mental disorders; ASD; Developmental disabilities

## Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction and communication, repetitive behaviors, and narrow interests. Disease units classified by categories are not clearly demarcated as “Normal” or “Abnormal” and are often distributed as a spectrum without boundaries. As indicated by the word “Spectrum” in ASD, there is a continuous link between individuals with clear symptoms and significant autistic tendencies and those with typical symptoms that are not clear and have typical development [1]. Symptoms of developmental disorders occur in their purest form during childhood. However, after adolescence, they are more difficult to recognize because of interactions with their surroundings and modifications by the individual. While a diagnosis of developmental disability requires that signs of the disorder have been present since childhood, information about childhood is often inadequate in adult cases. Diagnosis is deemed practically impossible because of the lack of information regarding childhood [2]. Particularly in cases of individuals with average intelligence levels, it is difficult to link parental awareness with medical examination behaviors [3].

People with an “Undiagnosed” ASD can exhibit several patterns. In one pattern, a person with ASD is overlooked until adulthood and is only suspected of having a developmental disorder when he or she begins to have social difficulties in school and work life and shows symptoms of adjustment disorders and depression. Rynkiewicz et al. [4] found this pattern was observed more frequently among women with average or above-average intelligence and conversational fluency. These women were less likely to represent the diagnostic stereotypes

of autism and more likely to be camouflaged [5]. Adolescents with this pattern are more likely to develop medical problems such as anxiety disorders, depression, and eating disorders, indicating a need for early support [6]. The second pattern is indicated as the Broader Autism Phenotype (BAP). The BAP refers to characteristics that do not meet the diagnostic criteria for ASD in terms of social, cognitive, or personality traits but possess broad ASD characteristics and is the central theme in studies of parents, siblings, or twins of children diagnosed with autism. Research focusing on the genetic mechanisms of ASD and environmental factors has shown that in families where two or more children are diagnosed with ASD, other siblings exhibit more pronounced BAP traits [7]. However, regarding BAP, research findings have been inconsistent, with some studies showing that the majority of siblings of individuals with ASD have more typical development and do not exhibit autistic traits when compared to related controls. Thus, an overview of BAP research shows that the focus has been on exploring the characteristics of genetic determinants among individuals with ASD in infancy and their parents (i.e., parents, children, twins, and siblings) and on family and sibling support [8-10].

In Japan, the Law for the elimination of discrimination against persons with disabilities came into effect in 2016 and required governments, schools, and companies to provide necessary and reasonable accommodation for the removal of social barriers as much as possible and to prevent the infringement on the rights and interests of persons with disabilities, including developmental disabilities. However, some teachers in Japanese schools believe that if ASD is not diagnosed, there is no need to give consideration. Because ASD is a spectrum, it is highly likely that students with ASD characteristics who have not been diagnosed will be left without the support they need. People with significant ASD traits have a history of strained relationships due to miscommunication, attention to detail, and an inability to cope with sudden changes in circumstances [2]. Consequently, they accumulate trauma with age and are exposed to mental illnesses as secondary disorders. Even if a psychiatrist examines the patient, the symptoms and course of the disease tend to be atypical, and the underlying developmental disorder is unlikely to be detected. Such cases are difficult to treat, and typical treatments for depression do not cure them or even worsen their condition soon after they improve [11].

## Conclusion

Regardless of an individual's diagnostic status, a society in which people with significant ASD characteristics can live comfortably

would contribute to a more inclusive place for everyone. It is assumed that a certain number of school students have significant characteristics of undiagnosed ASD. Even in cases where the diagnosis is overlooked in childhood, it is necessary to promote understanding among teachers and establish an environment and system to provide appropriate support in school life during the sensitive middle and high school years.

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