

Pervasive Developmental Disorder

Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) is a category of disorders that includes Autism, Rett syndrome, Childhood disintegrative disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, which includes atypical autism. All of these conditions are characterized by delays in the development of multiple basic functions including socialization and communication.

Those with PDD have difficulty with non-verbal behaviors including maintaining eye contact, using and understanding gestures and facial expressions, and reciprocal social or emotional interactions. Often they show a preoccupation with specific areas of interest that are excessive in intensity or focus, and leave little room for more age appropriate topics of conversation. Children with PDD are generally inflexible regarding routine and expectations, and can become extremely upset by changes in their routines. Often repetitive movements are displayed, especially when upset, including hand or finger flapping, or rocking of the entire body. Typically, they become preoccupied with parts of objects. Clumsiness, or motor-impairment is also a common feature.

Children who have PDD have generally had many traumatic experiences before coming to The Harris School. Because of their inability to understand social norms and behaviors, and because of their eccentric interests and patterns of interaction, they are often the subject of ridicule and bullying by other children. Children with PDD are easily upset by any changes that do not correspond to their expectations, and as such may have "meltdowns" when faced with changes.

The Harris School addresses the needs of children with PDD in a number of ways. First, every child is respected as an individual. This culture of tolerance allows students with PDD to feel comfortable and accepted, repairing the injuries often experienced at other schools. The low teacher/student ratio allows the teachers to interact closely with their students, encouraging eye contact and facilitating conversations to topics other than the obsessions of the child. The teachers also help the students to reflect on the motivations behind their own behaviors and those of others, an area where children with PDD struggle. The capacity to reflect on others' emotions and motivations is called "Mentalizing", and is aided by weekly group therapy for the older children. Routine is also stressed, and all changes and transitions are prepared for via discussion and visual or auditory reminders.

