

CROSS TALK

Should motor impairment be added to the diagnostic criteria for autism?

BY SPECTRUM

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Recognition that motor-skill delays and difficulties with movement are common in people with autism has sparked debate among researchers. If motor problems are pervasive, persist over time and potentially impinge on development in other domains, some argue, that makes them a key feature of autism that should be incorporated into the condition's diagnostic guidelines in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. At a minimum, that change could boost awareness of motor problems in people with autism and help to get those issues diagnosed sooner. Interventions to help foster motor development could begin earlier, too, with the hope of staving off any further delays or cascading negative effects on other skills.

Dissenters maintain that adding motor impairment to the definition of autism might only muddy the meaning of autism without clarifying the source of motor issues — and whether they are a cause or consequence of the condition. Though no one argues against getting autistic people the help they need, when they need it, not everyone thinks the solution is earlier delivery of existing interventions to “correct” motor deficits.

One call echoed across the spectrum of opinions here is for more and better autism interventions that promote development across domains, and that integrate opportunities for movement, participation and learning to enhance function and well-being overall.

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Motor challenges are a common yet under-recognized feature of autism.

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Jana Iverson

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Rehabilitation, Boston University

Interventions that integrate motor skills early and often make movement a tool for learning.

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Somer Bishop

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Adding motor impairment to autism diagnosis risks obscuring rather than revealing the source of motor issues and how best to address them.

test

Audrey Thurm

Director, Neurodevelopmental and Behavioral Phenotyping
Service, National Institute of Mental Health

Adding motor impairment to autism diagnosis risks obscuring rather than revealing the source of motor issues and how best to address them.

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Melissa Licari

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It is time to stop arguing and recognize that regardless of causality, many autistic people have movement challenges, and to ensure these are identified early and supported.

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