



What is hyperlexia?

What is hyperlexia? Hyperlexia is a syndrome characterized by a child's very early ability to read, combined with a difficulty in understanding and using verbal language, and problems with social interactions. Hyperlexic children are also characterized by having average or above-average IQs, as well as the word-reading ability well above what would be expected given their age. **The word hyperlexia is derived from the Greek terms *hyper*, which means "over" and *léxis*, meaning "diction", or "word".**

There are many characteristics similar to Autism and some consider hyperlexia to be an Autism spectrum disorder. Because of its close association with Autism, hyperlexia is often misdiagnosed. Often, hyperlexic children will learn to speak only by memorization and heavy repetition. They may also have difficulty learning the rules of language from examples from their parents, or from trial and error. Though the child may appear gifted in some areas such as reading and logic, the main characteristic of hyperlexia is the precocious, self-taught ability to read words well above their age level, which usually appears before the age of 5, along with a significant difficulty understanding verbal language.

These are the other common signs of hyperlexia. You may notice how many of these are similar to Autism:

- An intense fascination with letters, numbers, maps, or visual patterns
- A difficulty answering "wh-" questions, such as "who", "what", "where", "when", or "why"
- Echolalia, which is the meaningless repetition of another person's spoken words, usually done by a child just learning to talk
- Memorisation of sentences or sentence structures, without really understanding the meaning
- Awkward or unusual social skills
- Difficulty interacting with other people, including their parents or other adults, or other peers
- Rarely initiating conversations
- An intense need for sameness and to keep routines, ritualistic behaviours
- Difficulty with transitions because of the intense need for sameness
- A difficulty with abstract concepts, and only thinking in concrete, and very literal terms
- Very specific or unusual fears
- Selective listening skills, to the point that they may seem deaf to others
- Sensitive sensory capabilities
- Strong auditory and visual memory skills
- A normal development until about 18-24 months, then a regression
- Self-stimulatory behaviour, such as hand flapping or clapping, rocking, jumping up and down

Types of Hyperlexia

Usually, parents of hyperlexic children have had to go through numerous evaluations and received various confusing and contradictory diagnoses applied ranging from Autism, Asperger's, or even Attention Deficit Disorder (or ADHD). Some children with Autism do have types of hyperlexia, but it is not specific or confined to Autism. Instead, hyperlexia can be seen in non-Autistic persons, many of whom do have short-

term Autistic-like symptoms and behaviours. To help avoid misdiagnosis, hyperlexia can be further divided into **three distinct types of hyperlexia**:

First type of hyperlexia

The first type of hyperlexia is found in a child who is very bright, but neurotypical, who learns to read very early. Usually, after the parents have read to the child several times, the child begins to “read” the book which is actually rather their memorisation of the book triggered by the words and pictures on the pages. However, the child does soon learn to actually read and understand the words in the book and can then begin reading other books. Their reading ability is a couple of years ahead of other children in their age range or pre-school class.

Second type of hyperlexia

The second type of hyperlexia occurs in children who have hyperlexia as a “splinter skill” as a part of an Autistic spectrum disorder. Children with hyperlexia type II read a great deal, with unusually skilful memory for what they have read. These children also have the ability of memorization tasks, or number and calendar date calculation skills. They do have the characteristic language, social, and behavioural symptoms seen in Autism.

Children with type II hyperlexia often raise the “savant syndrome” questions with some clinicians labelling the hyperlexia a “splinter skill”. However, as pointed out earlier, the precocious reading ability can be a valuable tool for teaching language and social skills. Instead of being marginalized or trivialized as a “splinter skill”, therapists should try to embrace hyperlexia and use it as a treatment tool.

Third type of hyperlexia (Hyperlexia III)

The third type of hyperlexia is a less frequent diagnosis and found in children who read early and have Autistic-like traits, but they do not have Autism. These children read early, show extraordinary memorization abilities, and sometimes have other precocious abilities in other areas. They have some Autistic-like behaviours, but they do not have the full Autistic disorder. For example. These children can still be affectionate towards their parents, but still distant towards their peers. Their symptoms and behaviours are seen as Autistic-like and are not Autistic Disorder. These are the children who “outgrow” their Autism, but really they did not have Autism to begin with.