Autism: Understanding the Disorder
G. B. Mesibov, L. W. Adams, & L. G. Klinger

This is part of Plenum’s ‘Clinical Child Psychology Library’ series, which aims to provide up-to-date information on clinical issues for practitioners. Autism: Understanding the disorder is a well-written and comprehensively referenced guide to autism, its manifestations, possible causes, and approaches to intervention. Each chapter follows much the same layout, with a general introduction (often in the form of a case vignette), separate brief sections on each of the relevant topics, and a general conclusion. It is written in a clear and concise manner, and in a style that should be equally accessible to both parents and practitioners.

The book begins with a historical background on the initial work by Kanner, moving on to early theories—psychoanalytical, biological, genetic, behavioural, and neurological—relating to the causes and treatments of autism. The second chapter, on diagnosis, discusses the principal features associated with autism, reviews the standardised assessments available to assist diagnosis, and provides figures on epidemiology and a brief, but very helpful, section on differential diagnosis. Subsequent chapters offer a review of current biological and genetic theories; discussion of language and cognitive deficits on autism; and an update on treatment approaches, including pharmacological and psychological interventions. There is also a chapter on some of the more controversial approaches to treatment that have emerged in recent years (though I wasn’t quite sure why early educational intervention and supported employment should have been included here).

In summary, although running to only around 100 pages of text, the book provides an invaluable guide for parents or professionals keen to update themselves on the diagnosis, treatment, and causes of autism. It should also prove a very useful introduction for students and others who want to know more about this fascinating condition.

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Perspectives on the Memorandum: Policy, Practice and Research in Investigative Interviewing
H. Westcott & J. Jones (Eds.)
Aldershot: Arena, 1997. pp. 188. £32.50 (hb).

This is a useful first attempt to evaluate the Memorandum of good practice on video recorded interviews with child witnesses (Home Office and Department of Health, 1992). The contributing authors represent charitable and state-provided child protection services, police, trainers, and academics in the fields of law, social work, and psychology. The contributions should be read in the light of the background to the Memorandum as recorded by Brownlow and Waller in the second chapter. The Cleveland Report of 1988 and the open judgement on investigations into alleged child sexual abuse in Rochdale (1991) highlighted the complexity and sensitivity of investigation and assessment of child sexual abuse and an inherent conflict between the obtaining of forensic evidence relevant to criminal standards of proof and evidence and background information necessary for child protection and placement.

Expectations that Social Services might offer video evidence in civil proceedings were never put into nationally agreed guidelines. The Pigot Report (1989) offered guidance in presentation of court evidence by child witnesses, but these guidelines have never been implemented in full: children, even if their evidence in chief is provided by video, still must be available in court for live cross-examination.

The Memorandum of good practice led to a drafting of substantial resources for cooperative work between police and Social Services, monitored by Area Child Protection Committees, and provided detailed advice on conducting interviews. However, the majority of contributions in this valuable book alert the reader to widespread and continuing problems alleviated neither by the publication of the Memorandum nor by subsequent practice.

Thus, specifically from the point of view of the criminal investigation, the Memorandum has been used so little other than in cases of alleged child sexual abuse as to throw minimal light on children’s evidential capacity in relation to crimes of violence or indeed other crime to which they may be witness. The issue of therapeutic help for child witnesses, subsequent to a video interview but prior to possible use in a criminal trial, remains unsolved, with variable practice between one area and another. (In one recent case known to the reviewer, a Memorandum interview was carried out in respect of a 6-year-old boy whose sexualised behaviour, reported by foster parents, was persistent and profoundly disturbing. Once a single Memorandum interview, conducted according to the guidelines, had produced no useful data, no further action was taken. The child’s therapeutic needs, the need for help and advice for the foster parents, and the relevance of his behaviour to civil child care proceedings, remained unevaluated.)

There are strains between police and Social Services regarding who will take the lead in a child interview and what use may be made of subsequent documentation.

Substantial resources have been channelled into the preparation and maintenance of video interviewing suites, equipped according to Memorandum guidelines, and specific training for the undertaking of interviews. This is valuable in itself but the evidence available is that a minority of videos actually are shown in a criminal court (152 out of one sequence of 15,000 interviews: Butler, 1993). Thus, the emphasis on video interviewing distorts the balance of child protection work and the distribution and use of limited financial and staff resources.

The final chapter, by the editors, highlights these and related dilemmas, though it does not deal with the wider question of children’s testimony across the field of child abuse and neglect. It suggests a number of essential reviews of the current system, quoting the foreword to the Memorandum (Home Office and Department of Health, 1992):

The interests of justice and the interests of the child are not alternatives. Children have a right to justice and their evidence is essential if society is to protect their interests and deal effectively with those who would harm them.

The authors comment that promoting children’s right to justice may not equate...
with promoting their protection. Indeed, in the view of the editors, the Memorandum has increased the difficulties facing practitioners concerning conviction of perpetrators, which should be a matter of police investigation wider than the evaluation of evidence from children, which though obviously important, is but one aspect of the problem of child protection. Currently, ‘there exist no mechanisms for examining the outcomes for children suspected of being abused (i.e. were they protected, did their welfare improve?) nor seeing whether their involvement in child protection and criminal justice systems had any impact upon such outcomes’. Plotnikoff and Woolfson (1995) cogently discuss these dilemmas.

This book concludes with, for this reviewer, the inescapable conclusion that there is a need for a re-evaluation of the whole range of evidence regarding children as witnesses with an exploration of alternatives to the present system. ‘We must challenge the notion that in any other system than the current one the defendant’s rights are subjugated, and be open to positive alternatives which prioritise children’s welfare. However, a review of children’s evidence will only succeed if its recommendations are acted upon’.

In summary, this is a valuable book because, through focusing on one aspect of the maze of child protection law and practice, it highlights inadequacies and limitations in the wider system and provides an effective starting point for debate regarding their revision. Recommended.

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References

Psychotic States in Children
M. Rustin, M. Rhode, A. Dubinsky, & H. Dubinsky (Eds.)

Few encounters in our work are more disturbing and shocking than meeting a profoundly psychotic child. Psychotherapeutic work with children and adolescents suffering from a psychotic level of disturbance is only beginning to emerge as a researched treatment approach, while the organic element in psychotic illness is the subject of extensive current research and debate. In some cases there is evidence of nonspecific brain damage; in others the aetiological factors are likely to be more complex. The difficulty in attempting to unravel those factors and treat profoundly disturbed children taxes the resources of the multidisciplinary team to the utmost. Psychotic states in children is addressed to those engaged in that struggle. The growing interest in this topic has led to Psychotic states in children being chosen as one of the launch titles in the new Duckworth/Tavistock Clinic Book Service, which is intended to present current treatment approaches in a clear, accessible style to a wider audience. As the core of the book consists of clinical description, it may also serve to demystify the work of child psychotherapists.

Two introductory chapters describe the psychoanalytic theories that underlie this clinical approach and describe work in progress with a child emerging from a psychotic state of mind. Three sections follow: the first describes children and adolescents whose psychotic breakdowns have largely been precipitated by massive sexual abuse. The second describes a specific group of autistic children who manifest severe developmental delay, with or without evidence of nonspecific brain damage, in conjunction with a psychotic illness. A third section is devoted to cases where there is a complex intermingling of aetiology, compounded by factors intrinsic to the child and his experiences. Each section is followed by a commentary that draws out the clinical and theoretical implications involved.

Modern psychoanalysis, using the work of Klein, Bion, Segal, Rosenfeld, and Joseph, has developed theories that make it possible to think about the primitive emotional experiences at the core of psychosis. Miroir, Tustin, and Alvarez have added to our understanding of the failure of development in some autistic children.

Psychotic states in children shows that it is possible to make contact with some severely ill children and provides an overview of current thinking and practice among a group of child psychotherapists who use these ideas and have a special interest and experience in this field. Their dedication to this challenging work and to the relief of the appalling suffering experienced by their young patients and their families shines out of every page.

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Anorexics on Anorexia
R. Shelley (Ed.)

Anorexia nervosa is famous for its capacity to distort the thinking of its sufferers, and so it was with some trepidation that I approached this collection of 19 accounts of personal experience of the disease, the contributors ranging in age from 12 to nearly 50. From the introduction it is clear that the book is aimed primarily at anorexics and their families, with perhaps some acknowledgement of a wider audience—although not particularly a professional one. The professional reader should not be deterred, however, as there are valuable and at times poignant insights to be found in this book, most notably in the stories from long-term sufferers describing the agonies of an illness that can last for decades.

Unsurprisingly, family disturbances such as marital discord and alcoholism feature in several stories, as does sexual abuse. The caring professions, and psychiatrists in particular, are not often held in much regard, and in several cases the desperation of clinicians, utterly baffled by the challenge of a determined anorexic, comes vividly to life in the patients’ accounts of seemingly brutal or haphazard treatments.

Many of the stories make the claim, strongly underlined by both the introduction and editorial annotations, that tough re-feeding regimes are unduly harsh and can be counterproductive. Others place much emphasis on the value of caring relationships, both private and professional, in fostering the return to health. At the same time, an appalling toll of permanent physical damage and profound threats to life are recounted. My own view is that these emphases illustrate an essential element of anorexia, namely...
the sufferer’s terror of their own intense aggression and the consequent avoidance of conflict, and direction of the attack upon themselves. Yet such terror may often be understandable as a consequence of the abuse and hostility, both covert and explicit, that has been experienced in the anorexic’s childhood.

I would hesitate to recommend this book to young sufferers of anorexia, but their parents and other adults who are struggling with the illness may benefit, if only from the clear statement that anorexia is a serious condition that deserves substantial and skilled professional help. One message for professionals is the importance of sharply differentiating the firm challenge to anorexic behaviour that a therapeutic regime may provide from the cruelty of abuse, either active or by neglect. Simply re-feeding while failing to make this distinction can so easily be experienced as abusive, while failing to address the desperate physical needs that prolonged starvation creates is equally neglectful.

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How We feel: An Insight into the Emotional World of Teenagers
J. Gordon, & G. Grant (Eds.)

This book reports the results of a study on adolescent mental health and provides commentary by different professionals with an interest in promoting the mental health of this age group. Although not explicitly stated, the editors are presumably also those who undertook the study and reported the results in the first part of the book.

The study aimed to obtain a ‘snapshot view’ of the emotional worlds of early-mid adolescents in Glasgow through a questionnaire distributed to children between the ages of 13½ and 14½ at a cross-section of schools. The results form the basis of the first part of the book. The open structure of the questionnaires is a strength, as it gives a picture of the variety and complexity of the adolescent emotional experiences in their own words. However, it also makes it difficult to weigh information, so the 11 chapters reporting the results were difficult to read. Areas covered include ‘Self Esteem’, ‘Happiness and Unhappiness’, ‘How We Feel about School/Families/Peers/Romance and Everything Else’. Another concern is that the possible bias introduced by the 66% response rate is not discussed, even though, for example, CSA and eating disorders are not reported in the replies.

The second part of the book contains chapters by professionals who raise interesting points from this study and compare them with other studies and their own professional experiences. The significant impact that verbal harassment and bullying have on the mental welfare of young people is highlighted in several chapters, as is the need to help adolescents build their self-esteem and the ways in which adults can facilitate this. The difficulties that adolescents have in seeking help from their GP are outlined, and the features of a well-planned, responsive service for adolescents in difficulty are described. However, it is also emphasised that the mental health of young people is critically dependent on features such as employment opportunities and good housing.

The later chapters then begin to make sense of the profusion of quotes in the earlier chapters. Parents, teachers, and others working with adolescents on a day-to-day basis may find the later chapters useful both to understand the adolescents and to help them appropriately. The earlier chapters serve to remind of the rawness and proper sensitivity of adolescents.

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Introduction to Therapeutic Play
J. Carroll

The author states her intention to inform the reader about what play therapy is, both what might happen in a play therapy session and the principles underlying the approach. She achieves this well. However, it is hard to know for whom the book is actually intended. In some ways, it is a beginners’ guide, detailing the toys and setting needed as well as being admirably clear about how to set up a treatment and what needs to be considered first. Yet there are numerous references that, in my opinion, weigh it down, even if they serve to give it academic validity.

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Values into Practice in Special Education
Geoff Lindsay & David Thompson
£14.99 (pb).

At a time when the Government White Paper and Green Paper, Excellence in schools, is in focus, this book is very relevant. There is a clear attempt by the current Labour Government to make a quantum leap, with ideas of inclusion linked to the effective school models. As a consequence, the values of Warnock and the Education Reform Act are not only being revisited and questioned but revised in the light of current educational thinking. This book of readings is a useful contribution to the current debate.

Of particular interest are sections on community, school, and parental/child values. The second chapter, Values and Legislation, by Lindsay, is of particular relevance in the current debate, querying as it does whether legislation is of much significance in situations where resources are missing. He also asks whether we are ready for inclusion in schools, with the financial problems that LMS has brought to the funding issue. There is an interesting chapter by Lindsay and Thompson on how developing policies, such as a whole school approach, shape values.

Ingrid Lunt raises some significant problems with the varying values systems held by different professional groups in special needs, not least where personal value systems run counter to those of professional bodies. Perhaps an account of the range of value systems employed in local government would have added to the debate.

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Books by Members
Jenny Altschuler
Working with Chronic Illness
£11.99 (pb).

Julian Elliott & Maurice Place
Children in Difficulty: A Guide to Understanding and Helping
£14.99 (pb).

Philip Graham (Ed.)
Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy for Children and Families

Geoff Lindsay & Martin Desforges
Baseline Assessment: Practice, Problems and Possibilities
£15.00 (pb).

Fred R. Volkmar
Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders