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ABSTRACT

Dahlgren S.O. 2002. *Why does the bus stop when I am not getting off? How do children with autism, Asperger syndrome and Dysfunction in attention motor control and perception (DAMP) conceptualise the surrounding world.*

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One purpose of this thesis was to find out if children with autism within normal range of intelligence differ from chronologically and mentally age matched children with Asperger syndrome on tasks measuring theory of mind, comprehension of meaning, referential communication and understanding of figurative language. All tasks thus differed in demands on theory of mind competence, language competence, central coherence, executive functions and memory. A second aim was to find out if children with severe DAMP solved these tasks in a similar way as children with autism or Asperger syndrome did. The third purpose was to find out if the children in the diagnostic groups could benefit from theory of mind knowledge on tasks that were more complicated. Finally, the fourth aim was to find out if there were any specific diagnostic patterns in overall performance.

Participants were 31 children with autism, 29 children with Asperger syndrome, 21 children with DAMP and 33 normally developing children. All children were within the normal range of intelligence. The groups were matched for sex, chronological and mental age. One group of 14 non-vocal children with cerebral palsy and one comparison group matched for chronological age and IQ also participated in two of the five studies that this thesis is based on.

The main result of the studies showed no major difference between children with autism and Asperger syndrome in theory of mind competence. There are children with autism and Asperger syndrome that have a basic knowledge of theory of mind. However, this basic knowledge did not facilitate understanding of human behaviour in other experimental situations. The only difference between autism and Asperger syndrome was in language competence, where the latter group performed on a higher level than children with autism. However, the children with Asperger syndrome showed difficulties on linguistic tasks similar to those of the children with autism, implying language deficits in children with Asperger syndrome. The overall minor difference in performance between children with autism and Asperger syndrome in this thesis could imply that the differentiation between autism and Asperger syndrome is more of a social and political value than of a scientific one. The overall results also imply that there is no core deficit in autism and Asperger syndrome. Non-vocal children with cerebral palsy showed clear difficulties to solve a theory of mind task, questioning the suggested specific relationship between deficits in theory of mind and autism. The children with DAMP performed at the same level as the comparison group in all tasks indicating that these children do not belong to the same proposed continuum as autism and Asperger syndrome and that their problems in daily life could emanate from the attention deficit.

*Key words:* Autism, Asperger syndrome, DAMP, ADHD, SSPI, Theory of mind, core deficits, memory, language competence, central coherence, executive functions

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