



WHAT ARE SPLINTER SKILLS?



A splinter skill is the ability to do a specific task that does not generalize to other similar situations; a "splinter" of a fuller set of skills. Splinter skills are part of what is called the "uneven developmental profile" or "spiky skills profile" that is typical of autism.

Splinter Skills Are Not Savant Skills

Many people are familiar with the concept of savant skills. This is when someone with a developmental disability has a single ability that is far beyond the usual population. The most classic example of a savant skill is from the movie Rain Man.

In contrast, the autistic developmental profile is simply uneven. There may be multiple areas of strength and multiple areas of challenge. However, most autistic individuals do not have a single, special ability like the one portrayed in Rain Man (for instance, the ability to instantly count the number of toothpicks dropped on the floor). Instead, splinter skills are more likely to be an ability that doesn't generalize or that an individual struggles to apply in practical situations; for example, memorizing a whole city's bus routes but having challenges using public transportation.

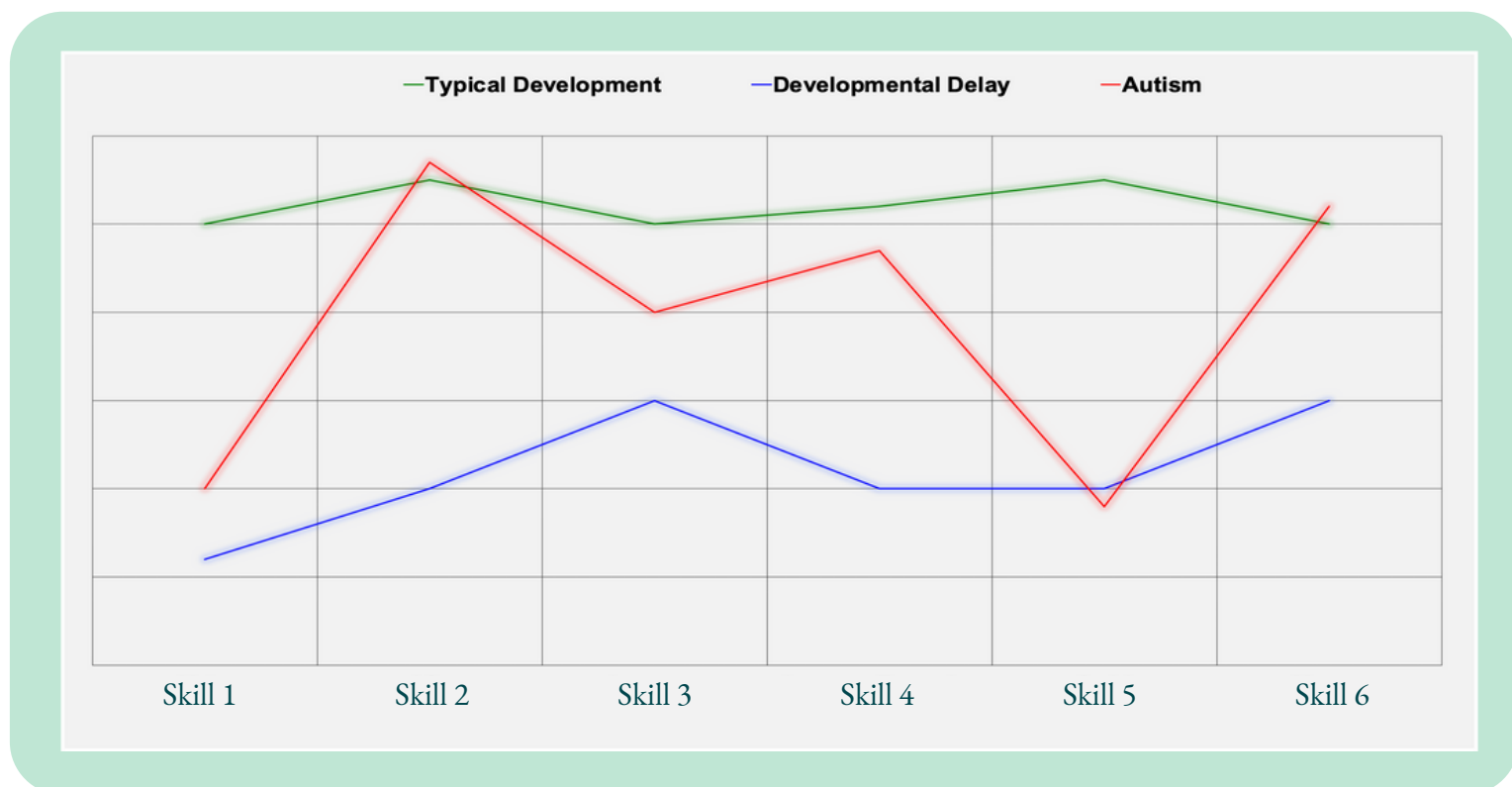


THE UNEVEN AUTISTIC PROFILE

Splinter skills are part of a larger pattern in autistic development. Some people call it a spiky profile, others an uneven cognitive or developmental profile. In typical development, a person may have strengths and weaknesses, but most of their skills develop relatively evenly. In developmental delays, a person may not achieve the same skills as a typically developing person, but again their different skills are all relatively even.



In contrast, autistic people tend to develop very high skills in one area but have deficits in another area. If you look at the graph below, you can see why this might be referred to as a "spiky" profile: certain skills spike very high while others remain large challenges. These skills could be things like working memory, expressive language, receptive language, or others. The difference between strengths and challenges in an autistic person are likely to be much more pronounced than they are in others.



WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?



There are no definitive answers as to why autistic individuals tend to develop with this uneven profile. However, when you consider some common autistic traits, the developmental pattern can make more sense.

It's incredibly common for autistic individuals to have intense areas of interest and to struggle with engaging in topics that aren't one of their special interests. That means that many autistics will spend a lot of time continuing to develop in areas they already love, while avoiding areas they struggle in, creating more intense spikes between the two. In addition, many autistics tend towards perfectionism, which can lead to avoiding new or challenging situations when they don't have immediate success. That avoidance can make it even harder to improve at areas that are difficult.

Finally, part of the autism diagnosis is specific challenges with areas like executive function or social skills. That can mean that an individual may have intense challenges in those areas without any difficulties in other areas.

Splinter Skills Can Occur Within A Skill Area

It's still important to remember that even within areas that are seen as challenges for autistic individuals, a person may have significant disparities between strengths and difficulties. For example, many individuals who cannot speak out loud (which we refer to as expressive language) can understand what is being said without difficulty (receptive language). Splinter skills often occur within a larger skill area that is a challenge, or simply is not a strength. For example, someone may be incredibly skilled at complex calculus problems, but not have an understanding of budgeting: both of these fall within the realm of math, but require different skills.



WHY DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT?



A common autistic experience is for those around them to make assumptions about what they can and cannot do. If you can buy a house, why can't you cook? If you can't speak with your mouth, then of course you can't go to college.

The uneven autistic profile explains why these assumptions are not accurate, and why each person's skills and challenges need to be understood individually.

We often refer to this as **presuming competence**. Presuming competence means that when you don't have any other evidence, assume that a person can participate in the tasks and interactions at hand. Even when there is another, similar skill that a person struggles with, you should still presume competence about a new or different skill.

A related principle is to trust an individual about their own abilities. If an individual tells you that they struggle with a task, even when you have seen them do something similar before, believe them.

Common Challenges



One of the biggest challenges associated with the uneven skills profile is that folks who have it often struggle to generalize skills. While neurotypical individuals can learn a skill and then apply the ideas or process from that skill to other areas of life, an autistic individual may need to learn each related skill individually. This can be frustrating, time-consuming, and difficult.

Societal misunderstanding and stigma is another common challenge. When someone is successful at certain skills that are highly visible (they have a job, own a house, etc.), they often find their supports removed or denied. On the other hand, those who have more visible challenges (most often those who are non-speaking) are assumed incompetent and not given opportunities. Both of these are incredibly harmful in the long run, as they can lead to a stifled and overly managed life, or a life without necessary supports.

These challenges are common in schools and the workplace, and can lead teachers or employers to make negative judgments about autistic individuals. Over time, that stigma has negative emotional repercussions, leaves people without necessary supports, and makes it challenging to be successful at school, employment, and in community.

SUPPORTING THE UNEVEN PROFILE

Splinter skills and the uneven autistic profile are not necessarily positive or negative. They are simply a different way of processing. However because it is not the typical way of processing, folks with an uneven skills profile may need different supports from their peers. Here are some ways you can be supportive.



1. Do not blame, accuse, or judge.

Many autistic individuals hear a lot of negative messages about their worth. They are told they are lazy, aren't applying themselves, should try harder, or are stupid. Even if you don't understand why or how a particular skill is difficult, trust that autistic individuals are often trying incredibly hard. It can be devastating to be told that something is "easy" or "simple" when you are working hard and still struggling at it. Instead of making judgments, focus on asking how you can help, asking what is challenging, or simply showing up and being supportive.

2. Do not make assumptions.

You don't know what tasks will be difficult and which will be easy for an individual. Don't assume that a person can or can't do something based on other skills they have. For example, you may be tempted to assume that someone who can't speak with their mouth cannot graduate from high school, but that isn't necessarily the case.

3. Recognize strengths and work to find ways that those strengths can be utilized.

Many autistics only get negative feedback. They hear a lot about the places they are struggling. It's less common for those around them to notice and comment on what they do well. Calling out those strengths can improve self-esteem, help someone notice skills they may not have realized they had, and remind a person of the skills that are available to them. You can take it even further by brainstorming how a person's strengths can be applied to areas they are finding challenging.

4. Be patient.

Many people with uneven profiles may require more time than others to learn or get comfortable with new skills and ideas. Work on being patient and try not to get frustrated when they don't progress at the speed you think they should.

5. Remind the person that they are valuable and worthy.

No person's value comes from their ability to do things well. No one is good at everything. Autistic people hear all too often that they are not as good as other people. Whenever you can, remind them that they don't have to earn their value.

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