Speaker 1:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program. Keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson:

Individuals with autism experience the world differently and often experience challenges with social situations or communication. Dr. Megan Boyle associate professor of special education at Missouri State University is a board certified behavior analyst. She runs a clinic for children with autism spectrum disorders and prepares the next generation of educators for behavior issues in the classroom. I'm Nicki Donnelson and Boyle is my guest today on the Missouri State Journal. This is the first in a two part series on autism.

Dr. Megan Boyle:

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder and individuals who receive that diagnosis tend to struggle in areas of communication, social interaction, and often engage in some repetitive non-functional behavior. Some of those repetitive non-functional behavior, we characterize it often as stereotypy. So sometimes that looks like hand flapping. Sometimes it looks like body rocking or maybe just unusual mannerisms of like toe walking. It can really differ pretty widely across individuals.

Nicki Donnelson:

Boyle is motivated by wanting to improve the lives of people with autism. As caregivers begin to better understand how to meet the wants and needs of someone with autism, everyone will be happier and more fulfilled. Stereotypy varies from person to person and Boyle explains that there are multiple schools of thought on the why behind the actions.

Dr. Megan Boyle:

There are a few different ways that people have kind of analyzed why those repetitive non-functional behaviors occur. And it really depends on your area of theoretical or philosophical orientation. So from my orientation as a behavior analyst, we talk about those behaviors, typically as serving an automatic reinforcement function, meaning that the behavior produces its own reinforcer. So kind of speaking loosely, they like engaging in those behaviors, for whatever reason. Some people have gone kind of further into trying to see, is it producing something pleasurable or repetitive, or is it reducing like, anxiety or some kind of adversive stimulation?

Nicki Donnelson:

Boyle wants to empower caregivers with practical and sustainable treatment options for problem behaviors. One step is improving communication and providing positive reinforcement for functional communication. One of the behaviors she has studied in depth is called elopement. A term used for leaving an area without permission. She has found that this largely understudied behavior can have several reasons for developing. Attention seeking, escaping a task, place, or situation, sensory seeking, or accessing an object or activity. She explains more.

Dr. Megan Boyle:

But elopement is either bolting, so running away from an area, or wandering. So kind of just walking away and both of those are characterized as forms of problem behavior because it's without permission. It's not like the person asks, can I go over here? They just take off or they just wander. So elopement can be really problematic because it can result in encountering dangerous situations, walking into traffic, jumping in a lake, getting lost, just getting lost in and of itself can be problematic. So the behavior is a really unique one in that it's problematic in and of itself because it can lead to other dangerous situations.

Nicki Donnelson:

Next week on the Missouri State Journal, Dr. Megan Boyle will join me again. She will discuss some of the therapies and ideas for improving lives of people with autism. Thanks for listening. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1:

For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.