

causes of autism in general, as well as the cause of the increase in diagnosis. Some researchers believe there has not actually been a dramatic increase in the number of children with autism. Instead, they suggest that a broadening of the definition of what constitutes autism spectrum disorders, inclusion of milder cases that would not have been considered autism in the past, and more public awareness of the disease account for much of the increase. Some people believe there is a relationship between childhood vaccines and autism. Although there is still no clear answer about the cause of autism, fear of vaccines has caused some parents to stop vaccinating their children. This raises concerns about the spread of other diseases that vaccines can prevent. This issue presents a challenging dilemma for social workers trying to work with schools and parents about how to best keep their children safe.

Luis is one of the estimated 4.6 million school-age children who have learning disabilities (Cortella, 2014). A **learning disability** is characterized by a significant difference between the child's overall intelligence and his or her ability to read, write, or do mathematical calculations. Most children with learning disabilities are intelligent, but get frustrated with school because they cannot master some academic skills as quickly as the other children. Early detection and assessment is critical. If the teacher, parents, and child are unaware of the learning disability, as in Luis's case, the child may be labeled stupid, dumb, or lazy and develop low self-esteem. Some children begin to misbehave and may be labeled bad.

Once a learning disability has been diagnosed, the school social worker works closely with teachers and resource personnel to develop an effective educational plan. The social worker focuses on the student's strengths and provides opportunities for success in a supportive environment. This strategy helps the child build and maintain self-esteem (see Box 11.1).

The US Department of Education has ruled that students who are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are eligible for special education services and resources. **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)** is identified when a child repeatedly displays distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity for more than six months. Since all children display these symptoms to some extent, detailed guidelines are followed in making the diagnosis. The cause of ADHD is unknown. Some experts believe that it is caused by a chemical imbalance or malfunction in the way the brain filters information, while others consider it an inherited illness, like diabetes or high blood pressure. School social workers may need to advocate for children with ADHD because not all school districts may be aware of their responsibilities to provide services.

Attention deficit disorder (without hyperactivity; ADD) is also prevalent among school-age children, particularly girls. ADD often goes undiagnosed because the symptoms are different from those of ADHD (Cantrell, 2015). Parents of a child with ADD may think that their daughter or son is lazy or willful when in fact the child is not able to process information as efficiently as most people. As a result, children with ADD often lack organizational skills and have difficulty tracking things like homework. Research suggests that some of what is being diagnosed as ADHD may actually be coming from reducing play and the

Box 11.1 From the Field

Social Work Persistence Barbara Weigand, MSW

I had been working as a school social worker for only two days when Joyce, the school nurse, came to my office to tell me about Angie, a seven-year-old second-grader who had frequently missed school. When she did attend, she constantly asked for food, clothing, and a ride home. People from Angie's neighborhood had been calling to report that Angie often wandered around the neighborhood asking for food or shelter. The neighbors and the school had made numerous calls to Child Protective Services (CPS) and to the police, but so far no one had been able to get any outside agency involved.

The previous week, Angie had walked into traffic on her way home from school and was almost run over by a van. The van driver brought Angie back to school because he could not find her parents. Again, the school had tried to get some outside help for Angie, but neither CPS nor the police would open a case.

Ms. Graft, Angie's teacher, told me that Angie's school performance was considerably below grade level. Angie could not yet recognize letters or numbers, count, or write her name. Ms. Graft had referred her to the school psychologist for testing, writing, "Angie seems to always need my attention. She uses me for help with all of her assignments, and I don't know whether she is just lazy or whether she really can't do any of the work. She often seems so sad or unmotivated. She has no friends in our classroom. She always wants to play by herself. When she does try to play with others, she gets into fights." Ms. Graft was concerned about Angie's recent behavior. "I took her home after school whenever I could last week because I was so worried about her walking into traffic again. I've tried to get food for her family, and I've found ways to get clothes and school supplies for her. But how will she go on to third grade when she is so far behind? And what if she walks into traffic again and gets hurt?"

Dr. Stevens, the school psychologist, shared everyone's concern about Angie but reported that her hands were tied because Angie had missed so much school. The special education laws required that a child be in school consistently for a certain number of consecutive days before being tested for a learning disability. Angie had never been in school for that many days.

I met with Angie the next morning. She was happy to come to my office. She talked constantly and seemed

to have a hard time sitting still. We played some games together to get to know one another. When I asked her to write a story with me so that I could learn more about her, Angie dictated the following story.

Once upon a time there was a little girl. She did not know where she was, and her name was Angie. Then she heard a call, "Help," coming from a big old forest. Then she ran and ran and then she found a bike. Then she climbed up a tree and called, "Help, help! There is a big old wolf after me! Then she said, "Hold on—I don't see no wolf after me. Maybe I'm wrong." Then all of a sudden the wolf came rushing after her. She just kept running and running for help but she never could find anyone."

That day I took Angie home after school so that I could meet her family. Her parents stated their stories. Angie's mother, Claire, had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 20. Claire stayed in bed for days and even weeks at a time. During those times, she had a hard time getting Angie up and ready for school. Claire reported that she had a case manager and that their housing was provided by the state mental health system. However, she had not been actively engaged in treatment or taking her medication, so the case manager had terminated services. They would soon lose their housing. Claire also reported that Pete, Angie's father, used crystal daily and that "he never comes down." Pete did not confirm or deny this statement. Both said that there had been frequent incidents of domestic violence in the home. Each reported that the other was physically abusive. The police had often been called, but both parents seemed to be at fault, and neither would press charges, so there had been no arrests.

I began working on Angie's case the next day. I started by filing another Child Protective Service report for neglect. Because of all the reports on the from the past, an investigation was conducted, but still no case was opened. I also contacted Claire's case manager to see if further help could be obtained for the family. The case manager was frustrated with Claire's noncompliance and refused to talk with me. Angie's case frustrated all of us for a long time.

However, little by little, we made progress. I continued to talk with people at Child Protective Services and at the

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