

Caring for Your Child AUTISM

What is Autism?

Autism is a disability that affects how a person's brain works. It usually appears during the first three years of a child's life, and it affects how a child will grow and develop.

Autism tends to occur more in boys than in girls. It can appear in children of all races, religions, and ethnic groups. Family income, lifestyle, and educational levels do not have an effect on whether or not a child is born with autism.

Children and adults with autism have a hard time communicating their thoughts, wants, and needs. They also lack the skills to interact with other people in a social way. Because it is hard for children and adults with autism to speak and interact with others, they often ignore the world around them. Some people with autism may use their voices to speak. Others may communicate with sign language or pictures. They may not enjoy play or free time activities in the same way as people without autism.

Children and adults with autism may do certain body movements over and over again, such as flapping their hands or rocking their bodies. They may act differently than others in the same social situation (i.e. laughing at something sad) or be very attached to an object for no reason. A person with autism may hurt him/herself or others. Children and adults with autism prefer doing the same routine day after day, and they often dislike any changes.

Although there are many people in the world who have autism, doctors, educators, and others who work with people with disabilities are unsure how autism affects people.

Is There More than One Type of Autism?

Autism is often called a spectrum disorder. A spectrum disorder means that there are many symptoms that appear in different ways in different people with autism. The differences between people with autism can be very little or very large. The symptoms can be mild to severe. When a child is diagnosed with autism he/she does a certain number of behaviors that are not common for other children of the same age. Although autism is usually identified by certain behaviors, each person with autism shows these behaviors in his/her own way.

Doctors, nurses, educators, and other professionals who work with people with autism use a book called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - fourth edition (DSM-IV) to help identify children with autism. This book names and describes many of the different kinds of autism found in children.

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Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) is the heading for many forms of autism including:

- Autistic Disorder
- PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified)
- Asperger's Disorder
- Rett's Disorder
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

Because there are so many different behaviors in children with autism, there is no one way to describe people with autism. Common names include autistic-like, high/low functioning autism, or learning disabled with autistic behaviors. These names do not describe the differences between each child.

The final diagnosis of autism depends on the opinion of the professional after spending time watching the child's behaviors. Most professionals agree that whatever diagnosis a child with autism has, education and treatment specific for autism will usually help them.

What Causes Autism?

A cause for autism has not yet been identified.

Many theories about autism from that past have now been proven to be false. The truth is:

- Autism is not a mental illness.
- Children with autism do not choose to sometimes misbehave and act distracted.
- Bad parenting does not cause autism.
- There are no known problems that can occur in childhood that will cause autism.

How Is Autism Diagnosed?

A diagnosis is made after watching a how child communicates and behaves and by reviewing the child's development. To rule out any other medical issue, a doctor may perform some medical tests.

The person who makes the diagnosis must be very familiar with autism because there are so many different ways that autism can appear in a child. The best approach to diagnosis is to have a team of professionals observe the child, discuss what they saw, and agree on a diagnosis. The team can include a neurologist, psychologist, developmental pediatrician, speech/language therapist, learning consultant, and/or any other professional who knows about autism.

Along with observations, the team can use these tests created to help determine whether or not a child has autism:

CARS - Childhood Autism Rating Scale (Eric Schopler, Ph.D. et. al)

ADOS – Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (Catherine Lord, Ph.D. et. al)

ADI – Autism Diagnostic Interview (Catherine Lord, Ph.D. et. al)

DSM-IV TR – Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revised

It is important that the professionals observe the child several times in different places so they can rule out any other disorder, such as mental retardation, behavior disorders, or hearing problems. Once autism is diagnosed and all other disorders ruled out, a plan for the best treatment and education for the child can be made.

People with autism may have other medical issues, such as epilepsy or mental retardation or they may have a genetic disorder, such as Fragile X Syndrome. Two out of three children diagnosed with autism will also have some degree of mental retardation. Some children with autism may begin to have seizures at some point in their lives.

What are the Symptoms of Autism?

Children with autism seem to grow normally until they reach 2 or 2 ½ years old. At this age, parents often notice that their child has problems with language, play, and social contact with others. The problems that people with autism have in these areas can vary.

The following areas in people may be affected by autism:

Communication: A child's language appears slowly or does not appear at all. The child may use words in a way that does not make sense. The child may use body movements instead of words, and the child may not be able to pay attention for a long time.

Social Interaction: The child spends more time by him/herself instead of playing with others. The child does not appear to want to make friends. The child often does not notice and/or react to social cues, such as eye contact or facial expressions (frowns, looks of anger or confusion, smiles).

Sensory Impairment: The child's senses may be affected. For example, the child may be very sensitive to smell or touch or not sensitive to pain. The senses that are usually affected by autism include sight, taste, hearing, touch, pain, and/or smell.

Play: The child does not show an interest in play. He/she does not copy the actions of others or start any pretend games.

Behaviors: The child may be very active or very inactive. The child may have many temper tantrums for no obvious reason. The child may focus on one item, idea, or person for a long period of time. The child may seem to lack "common sense" (i.e. he/she may run into a busy street without looking both ways). The child may show violent behavior towards others or him/herself.

The belief that children and adults with autism never make eye contact with others, show affection or other emotions, smile, etc. is untrue. People with autism do express feelings, but they may do it in their own way.

Living with Autism

Children and adults with autism usually live as long as people without autism do.

Some adults with autism live and work in the community with little or no help. Others need support from family or professionals. Some young adults and adults with autism may receive job training. There are also social and leisure groups for people with autism.

Adults with autism have a variety of housing options, such as a home or apartment by themselves, a group home, an apartment with support from people without autism, at home with their family, or a residential setting where there is constant support from professionals.

Is There a Cure for Autism?

Currently, there is no medical treatment or cure for autism. A child may experience a decrease in severity and/or symptoms as he/she gets older. Despite the lack of a cure, people today have a better understanding of autism. This knowledge allows others to help people who have autism lead a successful life.

What are the Most Effective Approaches to Autism?

Because of the many different symptoms that children and adults with autism may have, there is no one method of treatment for autism that works for everyone. There are many therapies that help people manage autism, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, sensory integration, vision therapy, music therapy, and auditory training. Certain medications and/or food restrictions may also help.

People who are trained to work with people with autism know that a very structured and consistent education and behavior routine works well. Children and adults with autism function better when they are familiar with a routine and know what to expect. Changes in a schedule or routine can be very upsetting. A good routine often includes time to work on communication, social skills, sensory issues, and behavior. An education/behavior routine for a child with autism should use positive reinforcers to reward the child, be flexible depending on the child's needs, and be used both at home and at school.

At an early age, children with autism should learn job skills and activity of daily living skills (ADLs) that will help them live in the community. Job skills may include sorting by color or size so they may get a job as a mail person in an office. ADLs include brushing one's teeth, looking both ways when one crosses the street, speaking to another person while maintaining eye contact, and buying something at the supermarket. The more skills the child has, the more independent he/she may be in the future.

A good program also provides guidance and instruction to the teacher, parent, or person who works with the child with autism. Knowledge about autism and how to manage autistic symptoms and behaviors is essential to working with people with autism.

With good educational and behavior programs, support for those who work with children and adults with autism, and people's desire to learn more about the disability, we can avoid past mistakes like placing all children with autism in institutions. Instead, we can help children with autism become as independent as possible in today's society.