

AUTISM



What is Autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disability (neurological disorder) which usually occurs during the first years of life. Autism is four times more prevalent in boys than girls. Autism knows no racial, ethical or social boundaries. Family income, lifestyle and educational levels do not affect the chance of autism's occurrence. Autism impacts the development of the brain in areas of social interaction and communication skills.

Symptoms

- ✍ Difficulties in verbal and non verbal communication
- ✍ Leisure or play activities
- ✍ Aggressive or self injurious behavior
- ✍ Repeated body movement (flapping, rocking)
- ✍ Unusual responses to people or objects
- ✍ Resistance to change/routines
- ✍ Sensitivities to five senses sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste

Different Types of Diagnosis under the Diagnostic Pervasive Developmental Disorder Umbrella

- ✍ Autistic Disorder
- ✍ Asperger's Disorder
- ✍ Pervasive Developmental Disorder (NOS)
- ✍ Rhett's Disorder
- ✍ Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

Diagnosis

There are no medical tests to diagnose autism. Medical tests may be completed to rule out other disorders. Physician will base diagnosis on individual's developmental history, observation of the individual's behavior (alone and with others), and result of test involving language skills, motor coordination, hearing and vision.



Diagnosing autism can be difficult. The final diagnosis will be made after the individual is examined by a team of psychiatrists, speech pathologists, educational specialist and medical doctors.

Causes

The cause of autism is not currently known. It should be noted that past theories have been dispelled including autism is a mental illness, autism is the result of poor parenting and that children with autism are unruly children who choose to misbehave. These theories are untrue.

Prevention

Since the cause of autism remains unknown, there is currently no way to prevent it. If you have an autistic child, you have a 2-3% chance of having a second autistic child.



What are People with Autism Like?

A child with autism will often appear relatively normal until age 24-30 months.

The Following Areas May be Affected by Autism:



Communication Language: develops slowly or not at all; uses words without attaching them to normal meaning; communicates with gestures instead of words; short attention span.

Social Interaction: spends time alone rather than with others; shows little interest in making friends; less responsive to social cues such as eye contact or smiles.



Sensory Impairment: may have sensitivities in the areas of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste to a greater or lesser degree.

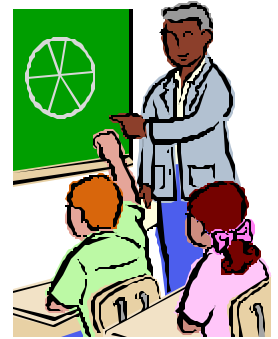
Play: lack of spontaneous or imaginative play; does not initiate pretend games.

Behaviors: may be overactive or very passive; throws tantrums for no apparent reasons; perseverates (shows an obsessive interest in a single item, idea, activity or person); apparent lack of common sense; may show aggression to others or self; often has difficulty in changes of routine.

It should be noted that every person with autism is an individual and like all individuals, has a unique personality and combination of characteristics. There are great differences among people with autism.

Treatment

Standard treatment involves education (early intervention is important) through Individual Education Plans; Behavioral Management; Variety of therapies including but not limited to applied behavioral analysis, auditory integration training, dietary interventions, discrete trial training, medications, music therapy, occupational therapy, vitamin therapy, social stories, and facilitated communication.



Prognosis

If there are disturbed behavior patterns in toddlers they tend to improve between ages of 6-10. However, it may resurface during the teen and young adult years. 90% of autistic children fail to become independent adults. The remaining 10% typically face lifelong struggle to maintain normal social interactions, communication and behaviors. In a few cases autistic individuals have earned college degrees, married and found fulfilling employment.

Duration

Autism is a lifelong condition.

New Information

Studies are continuing to determine if the limbic region (which controls emotion) is abnormal along with the underdevelopment in the cerebellum.

Imaging studies have suggested that autistic people differ in the way their brains respond to the sight of a human face. In a normal brain a tiny region of the cerebral cortex is activated, in the autistic brain the region typically used for perceiving inanimate object is activated.

Reading the language of the eyes (expressions) studies have shown autistic people find the task difficult.

The pace of discovery is accelerating. Scientists are gaining tantalizing insights into the autistic mind, with its capacity for genius as well as detachment. Suspected causes range from genetic mutations to viruses and toxic chemicals. We do know it is a brain based disorder. The phrase "mindblindness" is being used to describe the disorder.

Characteristics

Persons with autism may possess the following characteristics in various combinations and in varying degrees of severity:

- ✍ Inappropriate laughing or giggling
- ✍ No real fear of dangers
- ✍ Apparent insensitivity to pain
- ✍ May not want cuddling
- ✍ Sustained or unusual repetitive play; Uneven physical verbal skills
- ✍ May avoid eye contact
- ✍ May prefer to be alone
- ✍ Difficulty in expressing needs; May use gestures
- ✍ Inappropriate attachments to objects
- ✍ Insistence on sameness
- ✍ Echoes words or phrases
- ✍ Inappropriate response or no response to sound
- ✍ Spins objects or self
- ✍ Difficulty in interacting with others
- ✍ Failure to develop normal socialization
- ✍ Developmental delays and differences
- ✍ Unusual responses to sensory stimulation
- ✍ Mental retardation (75%)
- ✍ Uneven profile of cognitive skills
- ✍ Hyperactivity
- ✍ Short attention span
- ✍ Impulsivity
- ✍ Aggressiveness
- ✍ Self injurious behavior
- ✍ Temper tantrums
- ✍ Abnormalities in eating
- ✍ Sleep disorders
- ✍ Depression (in adolescents who are aware of their disability)



or



Myths of Autism

- ✍ Autism is caused by bad parenting
- ✍ All people with autism are alike
- ✍ People with autism have no feelings or emotions for others
- ✍ Once a person with autism develops language, everything will be okay
- ✍ All that is needed for a person with autism to behave more normally is a good behavior management program
- ✍ Autism is such a severe and hopeless disability that little can be done with these individuals
- ✍ People can be cured of or outgrow autism

DSM IV Diagnostic Criteria for Autism

- A. A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3):
- (1) qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
 - (a) marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interactions
 - (b) failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
 - (c) a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g. by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)
 - (d) lack of social or emotional reciprocity
 - (2) qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:
 - (a) delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
 - (b) in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
 - (c) stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
 - (d) lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level
 - (3) restricted and repetitive stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:
 - (a) encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
 - (b) apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals

- (c) stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g. hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 - (d) persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- B. Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to the age 3 years: (1) social interaction, (2) language as used in social communication, or (3) symbolic or imaginative play.
- C. The disturbance is not better accounted for by Rett’s Disorder or Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.

Remember: If you have told a child something a thousand times and he does not understand, then it is not the child who is a slow learner.

Tips for Communication with Social Stories



The use of “social stories” have been shown to be a great benefit to communication with individuals with autism.

Use three basic types of sentences:

Descriptive: Objectively define where a situation occurs, who is involved, what they are doing, and why.

Perspective: Describe the reactions and feelings of others in this situation.

Directive: Tell what response is expected of the person reading the story. (“I can try...”, “I will try...”, “I will work on...”.)

For Example:

Sometimes a person says, “I changed my mind” (descriptive). This means they had one idea, but now they have a new idea (perspective). There are many situations where a person may say, “I changed my mind” (descriptive). I will work on staying calm when someone changes their mind (directive). It is important to try to stay calm (descriptive). This keeps everyone safe (descriptive).

Suggestions:

Try to write 2-5 descriptive and/or perspective sentences for every directive sentence. Take time to carefully describe what people do, and why.

When writing directive sentences, avoid using statements that are inflexible.

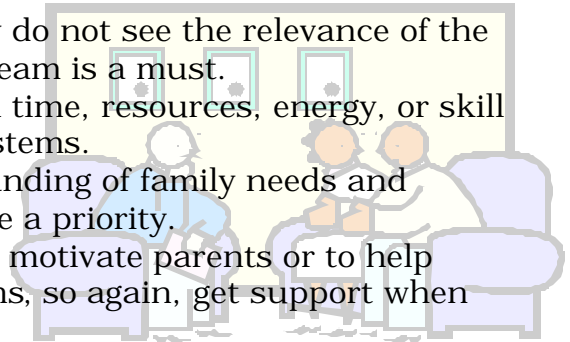
A Supportive Environment



- ✍ Trained professionals
- ✍ Individualized planning
- ✍ Commitment to less restrictive and more normal life experiences
- ✍ A compatible physical environment
- ✍ Remedial programming
- ✍ Commitment to encouraging appropriate behavior
- ✍ Commitment to a lifetime of support

Potential Sources of Conflict between Parents and Professionals

- ✍ Parent motivation may be lacking if they do not see the relevance of the recommendations, so education by the team is a must.
- ✍ Parents may be motivated but lacking in time, resources, energy, or skill to follow through, so explore support systems.
- ✍ Professionals may have limited understanding of family needs and priorities, so consumer relations must be a priority.
- ✍ Professionals may have limited ability to motivate parents or to help them articulate their values and concerns, so again, get support when you need them.



Elements of Collaboration

(Remember collaboration means win-win for all parties involved)

- ✍ Mutual respect for skills and knowledge
- ✍ Honest and clear communication
- ✍ Understanding and empathy
- ✍ Mutually agreed upon goals
- ✍ Shared planning and decision making
- ✍ Open and two-way sharing of information
- ✍ Accessibility and responsiveness
- ✍ Joint evaluation of progress
- ✍ Absence of labeling and blaming

Facts compiled from: Newsweek July 30, 2000

How to understand autism Jacqueline Tresl RN
msn Encarta reference Michael Woods BS Updated 2000
National Autism Society of America April 17, 1999