

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



Centre of Knowledge
on Healthy Child Development

OFFORD CENTRE FOR CHILD STUDIES

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are life-long neurological conditions that are present at birth. The disorders are variable: some children are profoundly developmentally delayed and have no language, while others are only mildly affected with average or above average intelligence and functional language. The first signs are usually noticeable by 12 to 24 months of age.

Children with ASD are all individuals and have their own strengths and weaknesses. They also each have their own patterns of ASD symptoms. Parents are very good at detecting developmental problems in their children and should be concerned if their child does not:

- Babble by 11 months of age
- Wave or use other simple gestures by 12 months
- Use single words by 18 months or 2 word phrases (e.g., car go) by 24 months
- Answer to his/her name
- Make eye contact when interacting with peers or adults
- Try to get his/her parents' attention

Some of the symptoms of autism spectrum disorders are found in three areas of functioning

Reciprocal social interaction

- Poor use of gaze or gestures to share interest in an object
- Failure to understand others' facial expressions
- Poor relationships with other children
- Has little or no interest in playing with other children
- Inability to understand that other people have their own thoughts and beliefs ("Theory of Mind")

Verbal and nonverbal communication

- Delayed or absent speech
- Peculiar speech patterns
- May repeat what they hear on television or in movies (echolalia)
- Language or gestures not used to convey meaning
- Doesn't smile when interacting with others

Preference for solitary, repetitive activities

- Failure to take part in imaginative play with toys (don't "play pretend")
- Engages in rocking or spinning movements
- Becomes entranced by movement of objects
- Moves hands or fingers oddly
- Lines up toys rather than playing with them
- Needs to perform activities in a certain way and becomes upset if prevented from doing so

Adolescents and adults with ASD are prone to developing depression and anxiety, although the reason for this is not well understood. These conditions can interfere with their ability to learn, have friendships, and hold down jobs. Treatment with medication and/or cognitive behavioural therapy is helpful.

Children with ASD often avoid eye contact with other people. They have trouble understanding what other people are feeling or thinking because they can't understand facial expressions or tone of voice. They seem unable to look for clues about appropriate behaviour by looking at other people's faces. These problems with understanding social interaction also mean that they lack empathy for others.

Types of ASDs

Autistic Disorder is the classical type that usually is present prior to age three.

PDD-NOS (or Atypical Autism) is a condition in which the symptoms don't quite fit with a diagnosis of autism and the children usually are not mentally impaired.

Asperger Syndrome is a condition in which the usual impairments of autism are seen but there is usually no language or cognitive delay.

Childhood Disintegrative Disorder is a condition in which 3- to 4-year-old children begin to lose language, their social skills, and cognitive ability.

What Causes Autism Spectrum Disorders?

No one knows what causes autism but it is likely a combination of genetics and the environment. There is no credible evidence that vaccines cause ASDs. We also know that parenting styles influence how well children do, but they do not cause autism.

Many adults with ASD are able to get a good education, hold down a job, and live on their own if they have the right services and supports.

How common is it?

Although estimates vary, it appears that about 1/110 children have an ASD.

What treatment is effective?

Most children with autism spectrum disorders do respond to treatment, but it is a case of "the sooner the better" because the best gains seem to be made prior to the age of six. Children who receive intensive early interventions definitely do better in the long run compared to children who did not receive such treatment.

Unfortunately, diagnosis is often delayed because many practitioners do not recognize the early signs of autism spectrum disorders, and treatment may be compromised because good, evidence-based treatments are not available in all areas of the country.

There are a lot of unproven remedies, many promoted on the Web, that are costly and time consuming. Families need to arm themselves with good information about evidence-based treatments for ASD. Go to www.cairn-site.com for reliable information about ASD.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Making Sense of Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Create the Brightest Future for Your Child with the Best Treatment Options

by James Coplan.

Bantam; 2010; ISBN-13: 978-0553806816

A Practical Guide to Autism: What Every Parent, Family Member, and Teacher Needs to Know

by Fred R. Volkmar.

Wiley; 2009; ISBN-13: 978-0470394731

Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew

by Ellen Notbohm.

Future Horizons; 2005; ISBN-13: 978-1932565300

Autism Spectrum Disorders: The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, and Other ASDs

by Chantal Sicile-Kira.

Perigee Trade; 2004 ISBN-13: 978-0399530470

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDES

1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism or Asperger's, Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition

by Ellen Notbohm.

Future Horizons; 2010 ISBN-13: 978-1935274063

Overcoming Autism: Finding the Answers, Strategies, and Hope That Can Transform a Child's Life

by Lynn Kern Koegel.

Penguin, 2005; ISBN-13: 978-0143034681

Playing, Laughing and Learning with Children on the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Resource of Play Ideas for Parents and Carers

by Julia Moor.

Jessica Kingsley Pub; 2008; ISBN-13: 978-1843106081

Toilet Training for Individuals with Autism or Other Developmental Issues

by Maria Wheeler.

Future Horizons; 2007; ISBN-13: 978-1932565492

BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Since We're Friends: An Autism Picture Book

by Celeste Shally.

Awaken Specialty Press 2007; ISBN-13: 978-09779471308

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Different Like Me: My Book of Autism Heroes

by Jennifer Elder.

Jessica Kingsley Pub; 2005; ISBN-13: 978-1843108153

Can I Tell You About Asperger Syndrome?: A Guide for Friends and Family

by Jude Welton.

Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2003; ISBN-13: 978-1843102069

WEBSITES

Autism Society of Canada

www.autismsocietycanada.ca

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm

Canadian Autism Intervention Research Network

www.cairn-site.com

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