

Autism At A Glance

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are a group of neurologically-based developmental disabilities. Scientists do not know exactly what causes the problem. ASDs can impact a person's functioning across a wide range, from very mild to severe. Individuals with ASD are not different in appearance, but they may communicate, interact, behave and learn in ways that are different from typical peers.

Is Autism a common disorder?

Recent statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that 1 in 166 people in the United States could be diagnosed with ASD. That means 22,000 children in Illinois have an ASD.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) include:

- Autistic Disorder
- Asperger's Disorder
- Rett's Disorder
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder

What are some of the signs of ASDs?

People with ASDs may have problems with social, emotional, and communication skills. They might repeat certain behaviors and might not want change in their daily activities. Many people with ASDs also have different ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to things. ASDs begin during early childhood and last throughout a person's life.

A child or an adult with ASD might:

- Not play "pretend games" (like feeding a doll)
- Not look at objects when another person points at them
- Have trouble relating to others or not have an interest in other people at all
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- Prefer not to be held or cuddled or may cuddle only when they want to
- Appear to be unaware when other people talk to them but respond to other sounds
- Be very interested in people, but not know how to talk, play or relate to them
- Repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language
- Have trouble expressing their needs using typical word or motions
- Repeat actions over and over again
- Have trouble adapting when a routine changes
- Have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel or sound
- Lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words they were once using)

What should you do if you think a child or an adult has an ASD?

If you or your doctor think there could be a problem, ask for a referral to see a developmental pediatrician or other specialist, and you can contact your local early intervention agency (for children under 3) or public school (for children 3 and older). Right now, the main research-based treatment for ASDs is intensive structured teaching of skills, often called behavioral intervention. It is very important to begin this intervention as early as possible in order to help your child reach his or her full potential. Acting early can make a real difference!



Tips

For Working With Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

The Autism Program gets tips from parents, professionals and others working in the field. If you have a tip or special trick that you use or have used in the past that you think would be of interest to others please e-mail it to: theautismprogram@thehopeschool.org.

Communication Tips

Helping your child communicate more effectively:

- Teach communication skills that are functional and meaningful
- Teach communication in the context of everyday activities
- Provide multiple opportunities for communication practice throughout the day
- Arrange the environment as necessary to create the need to communicate
- Reduce stressful speaking situations by avoiding:
 - o Competition for speaking opportunity
 - o Frequent interruptions
 - o Demand for display speech
 - o Loss of listener attention
 - o Frequent questions
 - o Excitement when speaking

Communicating more effectively with your child:

- Slow down when speaking with your child
- Replace long, complex sentences with short simple sentences
- Stress key words
- Use other modalities to enhance meaning
- When using spoken commands, make them simple
- Use visual supports
- Use object supports
- Be consistent

General Tips

Consistency, consistency, consistency

Do things the same way with your child each time, and do things the same way with other people. Without consistency your child may become confused or discover opportunities for manipulation.

Catch 'em being good

Whenever the opportunity presents itself, use a lot of positive reinforcement. Some children thrive on positive attention. Let them know when they are acting appropriately. If we praise good behavior we can hopefully decrease the need for inappropriate behavior.

Remain neutral and calm

Be sure not to raise your voice or show emotional reaction when your child uses inappropriate behaviors.

Use few words when addressing an inappropriate behavior

Using too many words provides unneeded attention. Keep requests simple. Tell your child what TO do rather than what not to do. Avoid using “stop” or “don’t” statements and always use a firm, calm respectful tone of voice.

FAQ's

1. What symptoms or observations signal an immediate need for an evaluation?

- 9 months: No babbling
- 12 months: No pointing or other gestures
- 16 months: No single words
- 24 months: No functional 2-word phrases
- Any age: Any loss of any language or social skills

2. Are Autism Spectrum Disorders rare?

No. Current statistics from the Center for Disease Control indicate that 1 in 166 children have an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

3. Do all children with autism have intellectual impairments?

No. The intellectual abilities of children with autism vary from the gifted range to severe and profound mental retardation. Studies indicate that 50 to 70 percent of individuals with classic autism have some level of mental retardation. It is important to note that intellectual functioning is difficult to assess in individuals with autism, and assessment of intellectual functioning in very young children may not be accurate.

4. Do all children with autism have some special gift, such as the ability to calculate dates or compose music?

No. There are a limited number of people with autism who are identified as savants. Savants are individuals with isolated giftedness in one or more areas. It is true that individuals with autism have what is called, splinter skills or scattered abilities. These terms refer to the fact that many people with autism have an uneven pattern of intellectual strengths and weaknesses.

5. Can individuals with autism respond to treatment?

Yes. We know that individuals with autism spectrum disorders learn through visual presentation, repetition and predictability. An environment that provides visual supports, structure, and repetition is most helpful. For more information on treatment options you should research University of North Carolina-Division TEACCH; Applied Behavior Analysis and Picture Exchange Communication.

6. What are some common elements seen in effective programs for young children?

- Comprehensive assessment leading to diagnosis and to an individualized treatment plan
- Individualized programming that is reevaluated to keep pace with the child's progress
- Predictable routines
- Functional analysis of problem behaviors
- Active family involvement
- Careful transitions across intervention settings (EI to School Programs; Grade Levels)
- Highly trained staff and use of empirically demonstrated strategies
- Focus on Early Intervention
- Intensive intervention (intensity measured by frequency of interactions and level of engagement)
- Attempts to generalize learning across environments (carrying things learned at school to home, etc.). A good program will assure that the child can demonstrate gains with multiple people and in multiple settings.



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Top 10 Things to Remember

When Working With Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

1. Use calendars, schedules, and checklists.

We all use checklists, calendars, and visual cues. Individuals with autism may find it difficult to organize their activities, so these techniques are even more important for them.

2. Organize the environment.

This can be very helpful and will give the individual with autism cues about what, when, and how. Reserve one area of the room for reading, one for puzzles, and another for schoolwork. Keep supplies handy and accessible to the child if possible.

3. Avoid phrases that are confusing; do not use sarcasm.

Individuals with autism have difficulty with abstract thought. They interpret verbal information very literally.

4. Avoid repeating instructions.

Individuals with autism find it difficult to interpret auditory information. Give the person time to process the information. Augment verbal communication with visual cues, gestures, or physical prompts.

5. Be observant of the environment and make changes in lighting and noise when necessary.

Individuals with autism can experience unusual responses to sensory stimuli.

6. Prepare the individual for changes or transitions.

Changes in routine are particularly difficult for individuals with autism. Using visual schedules and written reminders will help make transitions easier and smoother.

7. Emphasize social learning.

Individuals with autism must learn social skills that many of us take for granted. Social groups that are organized around favorite activities can provide a safe forum for early social learning. Socially interactive games (pat-a-cake, peek-a-boo) that require coordination between people can be very helpful in developing social skills and helping the child to “tune in” to those around him. Older children can be asked to help with daily chores that require coordination (handing mother the clothes pins, setting up an assembly line to put the groceries in the pantry, etc.). Use games that require turn taking.

8. Encourage the individual with autism to communicate their needs and wants.

For example, do not automatically provide dessert for your child with autism. Get dessert for yourself, and wait for your child to indicate their desire for dessert.

9. Seek out support from other parents of children with disabilities.

10. Have fun.

Make sure that you have some activities that are not related to autism.



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