

FACTSHEET ABOUT AUTISM

Definition: Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain. It impacts development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. People with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities.

Prevalence of Autism: As many as 1.5 million Americans today are believed to have some form of autism. At a startling 10-17% growth rate, autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder. Much of this is probably due to better and earlier diagnosis by healthcare professionals. Autism is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls. The reason for this is unknown.

Characteristics of Autism: Autism is a spectrum disorder, and although it is defined by a certain set of behaviors, people with autism can exhibit any combination of these behaviors in any degree of severity. Two children, both with the same diagnosis, can act completely different from one another and have varying capabilities.

People with autism process and respond to information in unique ways. For most of us, the integration of our senses helps us to understand what we are experiencing. For example, our sense of touch, smell and taste work together in the experience of eating a ripe peach: the feel of the peach's skin, its sweet smell, and the juices running down your face. For children with autism, sensory integration problems are common, which may throw their senses off. As a result, their senses may be over or under active. The fuzz on the peach may actually be experienced as painful and the smell may make the child gag. Some children with autism are particularly sensitive to sound, finding even the most ordinary daily noises painful.

Many professionals feel that some of the typical autism behaviors, like the ones listed below, are actually a result of sensory integration difficulties. If a child exhibits several of the following traits or behaviors, they should be evaluated for autism.

- Insistence on sameness, resistance to change
- Difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words
- Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- Laughing and/or crying for no apparent reason, showing distress for reasons not apparent to others
- Preference to being alone, aloof manner, difficulty in mixing with others
- Tantrums
- Not wanting to cuddle, be held or in some cases touched at all
- Little or no eye contact

- Sustained odd play such as spinning objects or an obsessive attachment to objects
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain, no real fears of danger
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Non responsive to verbal cues, acts as if deaf, but hearing tests in normal range.
- Difficulty initiating and/or maintaining a conversation. Communication often described as talking at others instead of to them. For example, a monologue on a favorite subject that continues despite attempts by others to interject comments
- Delayed language development

Myths and Misconceptions About Autism

- All people with autism do not make eye contact. Many autistic children do make eye contact. It just may be less often than a non-autistic child.
- Bad parenting or lack of affection by the parents does not cause autism.
- Autism is not a mental illness. Furthermore, no known psychological factors in the development of a child have been shown to cause autism.
- People with autism do not all have a special talent such as the seemingly innate ability to play the piano or understand mathematics.
- Children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave.
- Many children with autism can develop good functional language and others can develop some type of communication skills, such as sign language or use of pictures.
- Children do not "outgrow" autism, but symptoms may lessen as the child develops and receives treatment.
- While sensory stimulation is processed differently for autistic children, they can and do give affection. However, it may require patience on the part of the giver to accept and give love on the child's terms.

There is no known cure for autism but children with autism can learn and function normally and show improvement with appropriate treatment and education. Early diagnosis is crucial. By recognizing the signs and characteristics of autism , a child can begin benefiting from one of the many specialized intervention programs.

For more information on autism, visit the following websites:

<http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer>

<http://www.autism.org/>

<http://www.autism-resources.com/>

<http://www.cureautismnow.org/site/c.bhLOK2PILuF/b.1021889/k.BFD8/Home.htm>