

# The facts about **AUTISM**

## What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) refers to a range of complex developmental disabilities that affect the functioning of the brain. ASD impacts the normal development in the areas of social interaction, communication, and behavior. Children and adults with ASD typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure activities.

Autism is the most commonly known type of ASD. Other forms include pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), Rett Syndrome, Child Disintegrative Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome. The symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations, from gifted to severe. Although autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, children and adults can exhibit any combination of the behaviors in any degree of severity. Autism is a spectrum disorder, in which it can range from mild to severe and change over time. <sup>(1,2)</sup>

According to the Center for Disease Control, autism spectrum disorders occurs in approximately 1 of 150 births. The exact cause of the disorder is still unknown. Studies have shown that both genetic and environmental factors contribute to the occurrence of autism. Studies indicate that an individual is genetically predisposed to the disorder, but factors in the physical environment can contribute to the onset of symptoms. Although a cure for autism has not been identified, the symptoms can greatly improve with appropriate intervention and therapeutic support.

## Symptoms

Every person with autism displays a unique combination of symptoms. Therefore, children can exhibit the behaviors and symptoms associated with the disorder at varying levels. These include:

- Difficulty relating to others
- Minimal eye contact
- Delayed communication skills
- Problems adapting to changes in routines
- Repetitive patterns of behavior, such as hand or finger flapping
- Limited social interaction with peers and adults
- Repetition of words or phrases
- Inappropriate attachment to or obsession with specific interest
- Sensitivity to sounds, lights, and other sensory stimuli
- Inability to pretend or participate in imaginative play

## Treatment Options

If your child has been diagnosed with autism, early intervention is critical to your child's success at home, school and in the community. Research shows that intervention therapy during the early years of life can result in significant

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communication and social improvements for many young individuals with the disorder.<sup>(2)</sup> To provide the most effective treatment options, family members and professionals must work together to understand the child's behaviors and decide which intervention treatment is best.

Behavior strategies and educational interventions for children with autism focus on improving communication and social skills while reducing obsessive behavior and repetitive habits. Children will benefit from programs that build upon their personal interests and incorporate highly structured embedded routines.<sup>(3)</sup> Activities that promote interactions with peers are also important to the intervention process. Socializing with typically developing children helps improve social skills when the child is given the opportunity to observe and then emulate targeted model behavior.<sup>(2)</sup> Developing friendships with peers is critical to self esteem, school success, and overall quality of life.

Because children with autism are very concrete and visual in their thought processes, they often respond well when pictures and environmental cues are provided along with the verbal directions. Picture schedules, visual timers, first-then cards and other visual supports can help children appropriately express their wants and needs, smoothly transition from one activity to the next, and improve communication skills.

Some parents looking to relieve symptoms of autism spectrum disorders have chosen to use treatments outside those typically recommended by pediatricians and therapists. These types of treatments are known as complementary or alternative treatments. Some of these treatments options can be dangerous and their effectiveness has not been confirmed through evidence-based research. Before starting such a treatment, speak to your child's pediatrician.

## Next Steps

Children with autism look like their typically developing peers, having no physically recognizable feature of their disorder. Yet their behaviors can hinder their ability to succeed in school and the community. The intervention strategies designed by your child's therapists and educators may take some time to reduce symptoms. Remember to be patient, calm and persistent when trying new teaching methods.

A family therapist may help parents, siblings, and relatives address the potential disagreements and stress that could arise when determining the best treatment plan and implementing intervention strategies. As they get older, children with autism may benefit from counselors who can help them cope with the disorder through adolescence and into adulthood.

The period after a diagnosis should be a time of learning. Parents can access the many resources available on autism and its treatment options. Parents can acquire information on behavior management, either through consultation with a professional or through their own self-study, to learn parenting techniques that best support the child's unique needs.

Once the child and the family have coped with the diagnosis, it is helpful to talk with other important people in the child's life, such as extended family, teachers, and coaches. These individuals should have information that will help them support the child's needs and contribute to the success of the treatment plan. From an educational standpoint, parents will work with school administrators, teachers, and therapists to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that supports the child both academically and socially.

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Autism is one of the qualifying disabilities for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). For children birth through two years of age the child's state early intervention agency should be contacted for more information on eligibility and special services. For children three years and older, the local educational system will provide assistance with the special education process.

## Looking to the Future

Siskin Children's Institute is here to serve as a resource to families as they learn about their child's diagnosis. Please contact our Outreach and Resource Center to learn more about autism and take advantage of the resources, referrals, and training programs that we can provide to your family.

## Lending Library Resources on Autism

The following are recommended resources from our library, which houses hundreds of other books and DVDs on autism. See our catalog online at [www.siskin.org](http://www.siskin.org).

- 1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Ellen Notbohm, Veronica Zysk)
- Autism/Asperger's Digest [periodical]
- Autism is a World [DVD]
- Autism spectrum disorders: the complete guide to understanding autism, Asperger's syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, and other ASDs (Chantal Sicile-Kira)
- Dr. Thompson's Straight Talk on Autism (Travis Thompson)
- More Than Words: A Guide to Helping Parents Promote Communication and Social skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Fern Sussman)
- Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew (Ellen Notbohm)
- Thinking in Pictures: and Other Reports of My Life with Autism (Temple Grandin)
- A Treasure Chest of Behavioral Strategies for Individuals with Autism (Beth Fouse, Maria Wheeler)
- When My Autism Gets Too Big: Relaxation Book for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Kari Dunn Buron)

## Helpful Websites

- Autism Society of America ([www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org))
- This website offers several articles in its "Living with Autism" series on topics of interest to parents, such as: establishing positive sleep patterns, sibling's perspectives, supporting appropriate behavior, and many more.
- Autism Society of North Carolina ([www.autismsociety-nc.org](http://www.autismsociety-nc.org))

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## Helpful Websites (continued)

- Autism Speaks ([www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)) *This website includes a valuable resource for new families entitled First 100 Days Kit, which can be downloaded as a pdf. This extensive document describes the impact on the family, treatment options, legal aspects and resources, and includes useful forms.*
- Center for Disease Control ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities ([www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org))
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development ([www.nichd.nih.gov](http://www.nichd.nih.gov))
- National Institute of Mental Health ([www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov))

1. Autism Society of America (2008)
2. Autism Speaks (2009)
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009)