



Spotlight On Disability

Autism

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities defined by significant impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests. Many people with ASDs also have unusual ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to different sensations. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary – from gifted to severely challenged. ASD begins before the age of 3 and lasts throughout a person's life. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups and is four times more likely to occur in boys than girls.

Autism is the most common condition in the group of developmental disorders known as ASDs. This group includes autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger syndrome. These conditions all have some of the same symptoms, but they differ in terms of when the symptoms start, how severe they are, and the exact nature of the symptoms. The three conditions, along with Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder, make up the broad diagnosis category of pervasive developmental disorders.

There are three distinctive behaviors that characterize autism, which are difficulties with social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors or narrow, obsessive interests. These behaviors can range in impact from mild to disabling.

The hallmark feature of autism is impaired social interaction. Parents are usually the first to notice symptoms of autism in their child. As early as infancy, a baby with autism may be unresponsive to people or focus intently on one item to the exclusion of others for long periods of time. A child with autism may appear to develop normally and then withdraw and become indifferent to social engagement.

Children with autism may fail to respond to their name and often avoid eye contact with other people. Some may engage in repetitive movements such as rocking and twirling, or in self-abusive behavior such as biting or head banging. Children with autism don't know how to play interactively with other children. Many children with autism have a reduced sensitivity to pain, but are abnormally sensitive to sound, touch, or other sensory stimulation. These unusual reactions may contribute to behavioral symptoms such as a resistance to being cuddled or hugged.

Autism is a complex disorder. A comprehensive evaluation requires a multidisciplinary team including a psychologist, neurologist, psychiatrist, speech therapist, and other professionals who diagnose children with ASDs. Children with some symptoms of autism, but not enough to be diagnosed with classical autism, are often diagnosed with PDD-NOS. Children with autistic behaviors but well-developed language skills are often diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. Children who develop normally and then suddenly deteriorate between the ages of 3 to 10 years and show marked autistic behaviors may be diagnosed with childhood disintegrative disorder.

Scientists aren't certain what causes autism, but it's likely that both genetics and environment play a role. There is no cure for autism but for many children autism symptoms improve with treatment and

with age. Therapies and behavioral interventions are designed to remedy specific symptoms and can bring about substantial improvement. The ideal treatment plan coordinates therapies and interventions that target the core symptoms of autism. Most professionals agree that the earlier the intervention, the better.

As part of the Children’s Health Act of 2000, the NINDS and three sister institutes have formed the NIH Autism Coordinating Committee to expand, intensify, and coordinate NIH’s autism research. Eight dedicated research centers across the country have been established as “Centers of Excellence in Autism Research” to bring together researchers and the resources they need. The Centers are conducting basic and clinical research, including investigations into causes, diagnosis, early detection, prevention, and treatment.

The following websites can provide you with more resources and information on Autism:

Association for Science in Autism Treatment http://www.asatonline.org	Autism National Committee (AUTCOM) http://www.autcom.org
Autism Network International (ANI) http://ani.autistics.org	Autism Research Institute (ARI) http://www.autismresearchinstitute.com
Autism Society of America http://www.autism-society.org	Cure Autism Now (CAN) Foundation http://www.cureautismnow.org
MAAP Services for Autism, Asperger's, and PDD http://www.maapservices.org	Autism Speaks/Nat'l Alliance for Autism Research http://www.autismspeaks.org