

# Autism

## WHAT IS IT?

Autism is a general term used to describe a complex group of neuro-developmental disorders known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). Many parents and professionals refer to this group as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

In this definition, neuro indicates that it is neurological, or involving the brain and the nervous system. The term developmental signifies the onset of autism during childhood, as well as the fact that the disorder alters the course of a child's development. The word pervasive is used to reflect that the effects of autism cross several functional areas, including language, social and relational, as presented in the diagnostic criteria. In addition, many children with autism have altered sensory perceptions, other learning, medical and psychiatric issues, and there is considerable variability of symptoms, strengths and challenges within this population. It is important to understand the commonalities and unique features of autism, but also essential to think of every child, including those with autism, as an individual.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms almost always start before a child is 3 years old. Usually, parents first notice that their toddler has not started talking yet and is not acting like other children the same age. But it is not unusual for a child to start to talk at the same time as other children the same age, then lose his or her language skills.

Symptoms of autism include:

- A delay in learning to talk, or not talking at all. A child may seem to be deaf, even though hearing tests are normal.
- Repeated and overused types of behavior, interests, and play. Examples include repeated body rocking, unusual attachments to objects, and getting very upset when routines change.

There is no "typical" person with autism. People can have many different kinds of behaviors, from mild to severe.

## HOW IS AUTISM DIAGNOSED?

There are guidelines that physicians use to put symptoms into three categories:

- **Social interactions and relationships.** For example, a child may have trouble making eye contact. People with autism may have a hard time understanding someone else's feelings, such as pain or sadness.
- **Verbal and nonverbal communication.** For example, a child may never speak. Or he or she may often repeat a certain phrase over and over.
- **Limited interests in activities or play.** For example, younger children often focus on parts of toys rather than playing with the whole toy. Older children and adults may be fascinated by certain topics, like trading cards or license plates.

## IS THERE A TREATMENT ?

There is no single treatment protocol for all children with autism, but most individuals respond best to highly structured behavioral programs. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development lists Applied Behavior Analysis among the recommended treatment methods for autism spectrum disorders. Some of the most common interventions are Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Floortime Therapy, Gluten Free, Casein Free Diet (GFCF), Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, PECS, SCERTS, Sensory Integration Therapy, Relationship Development Intervention, and Verbal Behavior Intervention.

## ARE THERE ANY WEBSITES WITH MORE INFORMATION?

- <http://www.autism-society.org>
  - <http://www.naar.org>

