

Autism Defined

Autism is a highly complex and variable developmental disorder characterised by impaired social interaction, communication and restricted and repetitive behaviour. **Autism** is one of five disorders that are categorized as “pervasive developmental disorders” which means that the symptoms *penetrator pervades* every aspect of the child’s development: educational, social, emotional and physical. **Autism** is much more common than most people think. There are around 700,000 autistic people in the UK - that's more than 1 in 100. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can be autistic, although it appears to affect more men than women.

Researchers cannot agree on whether the trend is a result of heightened awareness, an expanding definition of the spectrum, an actual increase in incidence or some combination of all factors. Certainly, some of the increase is due to the way children are identified, diagnosed and served in their local communities, although exactly how much is due to these factors is unknown.

Rett Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD), Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger Syndrome are also categorized as pervasive developmental disorders. These five developmental disorders have been referred to as “spectrum disorders” (ASD – **Autism** Spectrum Disorder) because the multiple impairments can vary in severity and combinations. In addition to the core areas of impairment, physical and medical conditions may accompany **Autism** to include:

- 1) Genetic disorders.
- 2) Gastrointestinal disorders.
- 3) Seizure disorders.
- 4) Sensory integration disorder.
- 5) Sleep disorders.
- 6) Auditory processing disorders.

The following “red flags” could be signs that a child should be evaluated for **Autism** or a related communication disorder:

- 1) Does not respond to his/her name.
- 2) Cannot explain what he/she wants.
- 3) Language skills/speech are delayed or language skills are lost at some time in development (used to say a few words or babble, but now he/she doesn't).
- 4) Doesn't follow directions, acts deaf or seems to hear sometimes, but not others.
- 5) Does not point or wave bye-bye.
- 6) Repeats words he or she hears but does not use spontaneous language.
- 7) Throws intense or violent tantrums, is hyperactive, uncooperative or oppositional.
- 8) Has odd movement patterns and is very uncoordinated in movements (most noticeable when running or during gross motor activities).
- 9) Cannot sequence steps to accomplish a task (wants a cup off of the table but cannot sequence steps to get to cup).
- 10) Uses the same toys repeatedly and obsessively and never varies game, play pattern or activity with toys.
- 11) Does not smile when smiled at and lacks emotional affect.
- 12) Poor eye contact.
- 13) Does not transition between activities.
- 14) Seems to prefer to play alone and is not interested or aware of activities going on around him or her.
- 15) Gets things for him/herself only.
- 16) Does not share personal interest in item with parent or caregiver (Look at this, Mom!).
- 17) Child is very independent for age and hits milestones "early" compared to other children.
- 18) Walks on his/her toes.
- 19) Restrictively eats only a few favourite foods.
- 20) Avoids or seeks messy activities involving hands or body.
- 21) Avoids activities where feet leave the ground (swinging and/or climbing).
- 22) Child shows unusual attachments to toys, objects, or schedules (always holds something in hand or must put socks on before pants).
- 23) Child spends a lot of time lining things up or putting things in a certain order.

Early Signs & Symptoms of Autism

12-14 months

- Single words not emerging (by 16 months).
- Lack of reciprocity.
- Lack of problem solving.
- Not responding to Name.

18 months

- Lack of motor gestures.
- Not beginning to pretend.
- Language not emerging for social interaction.
- No subtle looking.

24 months

- Lack of imaginative play.
- No meaningful two word phrases.

36 months

- Inability to verbalize Emotions.
- Difficulty interacting with peers.
- Difficulty with taking turns and sharing.
- Little to no pretend play.
- Little to no communication.

Diagnosis

A child can be diagnosed with **Autism** as young as 12-15 months. Often children are diagnosed between 18-24 months.

There are no medical tests for diagnosing **Autism**, so an accurate diagnosis must be based on observation of the individual's communication, behaviour and developmental levels. Diagnosing the condition is not an exact science. Medical tests may, however, be used to rule out or identify other possible causes of symptoms since many of the behaviours associated with **Autism** are shared with other disorders. While currently each order has a specific set

of accompanying symptoms, with the new publication of the DSM-5 diagnostic manual in May 2013, all sub-types of **Autism** will be merged less than one umbrella diagnosis of ASD.

Cause

No single cause for **Autism** has been identified and there is much debate among top researchers whether the triggers are genetic or environmental. However, there is general acceptance that abnormality in brain structure or function is at the root. Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in children with **Autism** versus those who do not have **Autism**, and researchers continue to investigate a variety of theories and links.

Curable? Treatable?

While **Autism** is not yet curable, it is treatable with early diagnosis and implementation of intensive therapy interventions such as:

- 1) Speech therapy.
- 2) Occupational therapy.
- 3) Physical therapy.
- 4) Behavioural therapy.
- 5) Play-based floor therapy.
- 6) Social therapy.
- 7) Auditory integration therapy.
- 8) Sensory integration therapy.
- 9) Biomedical and Detoxification Therapy.