

## Autism in Children

### What is Autism?

Autism is one of the mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders that appears in early childhood. Autistic children may have a serious lifelong disability. However, with appropriate treatment and training, some autistic children can develop certain aspects of independence in their lives. Parents should support their autistic children in developing those skills that use their strengths so they will feel good about themselves.

### Signs

When an infant or toddler:

- Does not cuddle or respond to affection and touching
- Does not make eye contact
- Appears to be unable to communicate
- Displays persistent failure to develop two-way social relationships in any situation
- Does not show a preference for parents over other adults
- Does not develop friendships with other children
- Has poor language skills, or nonexistent ones
- Finds moving objects, such as a fan, a great fascination
- May repeat television commercials
- May indulge in complex bedtime rituals
- Displays repetitive activities of a restrictive range
- May form an unusual attachment to odd objects such as a paper or rubber band
- Spins and repeats body movements, such as arm flapping
- Shows unusual, extreme responses to objects – either avoidance or preoccupation

The symptoms of autism range from mild to severe. Although symptoms of the disorder sometimes can be seen in early infancy, the condition may appear after months of normal development. About 7 in every 10 children and adolescents with autism also have mental retardation or other problems with their brain function or structure.

### Occurrence

Recent studies estimate that as many as 14 children out of 10,000 may have autism or a related condition. About 125,000 Americans are affected by these disorders, and nearly 4,000 families across the country have two or more children with autism. Three times as many boys as girls have autism.

### Causes

Researchers are unsure about what causes autism. Several studies suggest that autistic disorder might be caused by a combination of biological factors, including exposure to a virus before birth, a problem with the immune system, or genetics.

### Treatment

Parents who suspect autism in their child should ask their family doctor or pediatrician to refer them to a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who can accurately diagnose the autism and the degree of severity, and determine the appropriate educational measures. Drugs are of minor importance in the treatment of autism. Antidepressants occasionally help a little. Standard antipsychotic agents, especially antipsychotic

drugs, lithium, and beta-blockers, may be needed for autistic persons who strike out at themselves or others. Conventional anti-psychotic drugs are often highly sedative and have serious side effects, including body movement disorders. Anticonvulsants may be useful; some researchers have suggested that unrecognized partial complex epileptic seizures, which cause changes in consciousness but not physical convulsions, are one source of autistic behavior problems. Little is known about the long-term effects of drugs on autistic persons. They should be used only for specific symptoms, not merely to keep a child docile or quiet the anxiety of a parent or doctor.

### **Autism Affects the Whole Family**

In addition to working with the autistic child, the child and adolescent psychiatrist can help the family resolve stress – for example, a feeling among the siblings that they are being neglected in favor of the autistic child, or embarrassment about bringing their friends home. The child and adolescent psychiatrist can help parents with the emotional problems that may arise as a result of living with an autistic child and also help them provide the best possible nurturing and learning environment for the child.

### **Resources for Parents**

The parents of an autistic child bear a heavy burden. They are frustrated by the child's inability to communicate, impulsiveness, emotional unresponsiveness, self-destructive behavior, and eating and toileting problems. Some parents find it difficult to accept the diagnosis and constantly look for other explanations. Many cope well enough, but all can benefit from some guidance and services, including counseling or supportive psychotherapy. An important resource for parents is the Autism Society of America, a mutual aid group founded in 1965, which provides information and referral services and supports initiatives in research, education, and treatment.

### **For More Information**

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to [www.mhacolorado.org](http://www.mhacolorado.org).

### **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**

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### **Autism Society of America**

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