

Understanding Autism

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. It is a neurological disorder affecting communication, social, cognitive, and behavioral functioning. Autism is estimated to occur in as many as 1 in 110 individuals, and is four times more likely in boys than girls. Autism knows no racial, ethnic, social boundaries, family income, lifestyle, or educational levels and can affect any child and any family.

Diagnosing autism . . .

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, or DSM-IV, "autistic disorder" is listed as one of the Pervasive Developmental Disorders¹ **because of its impact on multiple areas of an individual's language, social and motor development.** A formal diagnosis of autism is made when a person displays six or more of twelve symptoms listed in areas of social interaction, communication and behavior:

Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:

- Marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
- Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
- A lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)
- Lack of social or emotional reciprocity

Qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:

- Delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gestures or mime)
- In individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
- Stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
- Lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level

Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:

- Encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
- Apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
- Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (hand or finger-flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
- Persistent preoccupation with parts of object

After the diagnosis...

Although there is no "cure," early detection and intervention can drastically improve outcomes for children diagnosed with autism. A first step for parents dealing with a new diagnosis is to

¹ Pervasive developmental disorders are also known as autism-spectrum disorders and include Rett's disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, autism and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified. Because its genetic etiology has been identified, Rett's disorder is frequently not included in some non-DSM IV classification schemes. Pervasive developmental disorders are distinguished from two other categories of developmental disorders, global developmental disorders (or mental retardation) and specific developmental disorders (or learning disabilities).

find others who can offer support and encouragement through the early stages of accepting and understanding their special child. Once families are ready to move forward in their role as primary advocate for their child, it will be helpful to create a notebook in which important information can be kept: a schedule of upcoming appointments; names of specialists; contact numbers for community resources; detailed notes/records from conversations with clinicians, educators; copies of all correspondence and written information regarding your child; a list of questions to ask at the next appointment; notes on their child's progress, etc. In addition, we recommend taking the following essential steps, with the help and guidance of your child's primary care physician, to insure the best outcomes for both child and family.

- Seek physician referrals for further assessments and testing. A diagnosis is just the beginning. Functional assessments are necessary to understand the developmental needs of your child, and to obtaining the recommendations necessary for effective early interventions.
- If your child is three years or younger, contact your state early intervention agency (in Washington, the Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program).
- If your child is three years or older, contact your local school district to arrange for preschool services.
- Study the benefits for service offered by your insurance plan and explore options for supplementary plans for children.
- Contact any and all organizations and agencies offering services and support for developmental disabilities/autism spectrum disorders to determine availability of resources for your family.
- Join a parent support group in your area. Parenting a child with autism is both rewarding and challenging; relationship with other parents dealing with similar issues and concerns is invaluable.
- Seek opportunities to learn more about parenting a child with special needs. Become an informed consumer. Explore information about treatments, clinical and complimentary therapies, service delivery models, and current research on causes and potential cures. Discuss these issues with your child's health care provider, therapists and educators.
- Become even more involved with your child. The loving relationship you offer to your child with autism is primary to his or her development.