

What is Autism

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a "spectrum disorder" that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees. There is no known single cause of autism, but increased awareness and funding can help families today.

In March 2012, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued their ADDM autism prevalence report. The report concluded that the prevalence of autism had risen to 1 in every 88 births in the United States and almost 1 in 54 boys. The spotlight shown on autism as a result of the prevalence increase opens opportunities for the nation to consider how to serve these families facing a lifetime of supports for their children.

Know the Signs: Early Identification Can Change Lives

Autism is treatable. Children do not "outgrow" autism, but studies show that early diagnosis and intervention lead to significantly improved outcomes.

Here are some signs to look for in the children in your life:

- Lack of or delay in spoken language
- Repetitive use of language and/or motor mannerisms, such as hand-flapping or twirling objects
- Little or no eye contact
- Lack of interest in peer relationships
- Lack of spontaneous or make-believe play
- Persistent fixation on parts of objects

Symptoms

The characteristic behaviors of autism spectrum disorders may or may not be apparent in infancy (18 to 24 months), but usually become obvious during early childhood (24 months to 6 years).

As part of a well-baby/well-child visit, your child's doctor should do a "developmental screening," asking specific questions about your baby's progress.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) lists five behaviors that signal further evaluation is warranted:

- Does not babble or coo by 12 months
- Does not gesture (point, wave, grasp) by 12 months
- Does not say single words by 16 months
- Does not say two-word phrases on his or her own by 24 months
- Has any loss of any language or social skill at any age

Having any of these five "red flags" does not mean your child has autism. But because the symptoms of the disorder vary so much, a child showing these behaviors should have further evaluations by a multidisciplinary team. This team may include a

neurologist, psychologist, developmental pediatrician, speech/language therapist, learning consultant, or other professionals knowledgeable about autism.

Diagnosis

When parents or support providers become concerned that their child is not following a typical developmental course, they turn to experts, including psychologists, educators and medical professionals, for a diagnosis.

At first glance, some persons with autism may appear to have an intellectual disability, a sensory integration disorder, or problems with hearing or vision. It is important to distinguish autism from other conditions, since an accurate diagnosis and early identification can provide the basis for building an appropriate and effective educational and treatment program.

A brief observation in a single setting cannot present a true picture of an individual's abilities and behaviors. Parental and/or teachers' input and developmental history are important components of making an accurate diagnosis.

There are many differences between a medical diagnosis and an educational determination, or school evaluation, of a disability.

A medical diagnosis is made by a physician based on an assessment of symptoms and diagnostic tests. A medical diagnosis of autism, for instance, is most frequently made by a physician according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR) of the American Psychological Association (2000). This manual guides physicians in diagnosing Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified according to a specific number of symptoms.

An educational determination, in contrast, is made by a multidisciplinary evaluation team comprised of various school professionals. The evaluation results are looked at by a team of qualified professionals and the parents to determine whether a student qualifies for special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Hawkins, 2009).