

Autism Basics

(The following information is taken from the Autism Society of America website -- www.autism-society.org.)

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. The result of a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain, autism and its associated behaviors have been estimated to occur in as many as 2 to 6 in 1,000 individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001). Autism is four times more prevalent in boys than girls and knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries. Family income, lifestyle, and educational levels do not affect the chance of autism's occurrence.

It is estimated that some 500,000 to 1,500,000 people in the U.S. today have autism or some form of pervasive developmental disorder. Its prevalence rate makes autism one of the most common developmental disabilities.

Autism is a spectrum disorder. In other words, the symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations, from mild to severe. Although autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, children and adults can exhibit any combination of the behaviors in any degree of severity.

Under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorders are 5 main types:

Autism

Asperger's Syndrome

Rett's Disorder (affecting only girls)

Child Disintegrative Disorder

PDDNOS (pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified)

Although a single specific cause of autism is not known, current research links autism to biological or neurological differences in the brain.

Autism is not a mental illness. Children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave. Autism is not caused by bad parenting. Furthermore, no known psychological factors in the development of the child have been shown to cause autism.

Children with an autism spectrum disorder often appear relatively normal in their development until the age of 24-30 months, when parents may notice delays in language, play or social interaction. Any of the following delays, by themselves, would not result in a diagnosis of a pervasive developmental disorder. Autism is a combination of several developmental challenges.

The following areas are among those that may be affected by autism: Communication

Social Interaction

Sensory Impairment

Play

Behaviors (may be overactive or very passive; throws tantrums for no apparent reason;

perseverates (shows an obsessive interest in a single item, idea, activity or person);
apparent lack of common sense; may show aggression to others or self; often has
difficulty with changes in routine)

Contrary to popular understanding, many children and adults with autism may make eye contact, show affection, smile and laugh, and demonstrate a variety of other emotions, although in varying degrees. Like other children, they respond to their environment in both positive and negative ways. Autism may affect their range of responses and make it more difficult to control how their bodies and minds react. People with autism can learn to compensate for and cope with their disability, often quite well.

To cure means "to restore to health, soundness, or normality." In the medical sense, there is no cure for the differences in the brain which result in autism. However, better understanding of the disorder has led to the development of better coping mechanisms and strategies for the various manifestations of the disability. Some of these symptoms may lessen as the child ages; others may disappear altogether. With appropriate intervention, many of the associated behaviors can be positively changed, even to the point in some cases, that the child or adult may appear to the untrained person to no longer have autism. The majority of children and adults will, however, continue to exhibit some manifestations of autism to some degree throughout their entire lives.