

WHAT IS AUTISM?

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 impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interactions and communication skills. Children and adults with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities.

Autism is a spectrum disorder. 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. Two children, both with the same diagnosis, can act very differently from one another and have varying skills.

Parents may hear different terms used to describe children within this spectrum, such as autistic-like, autistic tendencies, autism spectrum, high-functioning or low-functioning autism, or more-able or less-able. More important than the terms used is to understand that, **whatever the diagnosis, children with autism can learn and function productively and show gains with appropriate education and treatment.**

POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF AUTISM

- Inappropriate laughing and giggling
- No real fear of dangers
- Apparent insensitivity to pain
- May not want cuddling
- Uneven physical or verbal skills
- May avoid eye contact
- May prefer to be alone
- Difficulty in expressing needs; may use gestures
- Insistence on sameness
- Echoes words or phrases
- Inappropriate response to sounds
- Spins objects or self
- Difficulty in mixing with other children
- Inappropriate attachment to objects
- Tantrums
- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Not responsive to verbal cues; acts as if deaf although hearing tests in normal range

CONSULTING WITH PROFESSIONALS

The following is a suggested multidisciplinary assessment team:

- Developmental pediatrician
- Child psychiatrist
- Clinical psychologist
- Occupational therapist
- Physical therapist
- Speech/language therapist
- Social worker
- Autism specialist
- Special education teachers
- Other teachers and administrators

Communication between parents, teachers and professionals is essential to monitor the child's progress. Here are some guidelines.

Be informed. Learn as much as you can about your child's/student's disability. Be prepared for meetings with doctors, therapists, and school personnel. Write down your questions and concerns. Be organized. Many parents and teachers find it useful to keep a notebook detailing their child's/student's diagnosis and treatment. Communicate. It's important to ensure open communication—both good and bad.

Be an advocate for the children with autism.



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