

Autism—the Basics

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What Is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder. It impairs an individual's ability to interact socially, communicate clearly and effectively, and behave appropriately. Autism is one of five disorders in a group known as autism spectrum disorders or pervasive development disorders.



What Are Some Signs/Symptoms of Autism?

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition* lists several factors that can lead to a diagnosis of autism.

Social Interaction

Impairments can include:

- difficulty using nonverbal behaviors such as eye-gaze, facial expressions, body postures, and gestures.
- difficulty forming peer relationships.
- difficulty seeking out others for the purpose of sharing enjoyment, interests, or achievements.
- difficulty with the “back-and-forth” nature of relationships for social or emotional purposes.

Communication

Impairments can include:

- delay or lack of development of spoken language.
- difficulty starting or maintaining a conversation.
- using stereotyped (“repetitive, often seemingly driven, and nonfunctional,” p. 131) or idiosyncratic (odd or peculiar) language.
- lacking variety and spontaneity in make-believe play or social imitative play.

Behavior

Impairments can include:

- being preoccupied with an interest—intensity or focus is abnormal.
- being inflexible and sticking to specific routines or rituals that may not be “purposeful.”
- using stereotyped or repetitive motor movements such as hand or finger flapping or twisting or whole-body movements.
- preoccupation with parts of objects.

(1994, p. 75)

Whom Does Autism Affect?

Autism affects individuals of all races and ethnicities. It affects boys three to four times more often than girls. Autism seems to run in families, indicating a possible genetic link to the disorder. This disorder occurs in about one out of every 150 births (Autism Society of America, 2008, ¶ 2).



When Does Autism Occur?

Symptoms of autism are often noticeable before age three. There is no known cure for autism. It continues throughout an individual's life.

Where Does Autism Occur?

Autism occurs all over the world. It occurs in any socioeconomic background.

Why Does Autism Occur?

There is no known cause of autism. Many specialists believe autism is a brain disorder.

How Can I Approach Treatment For Autism?

It is best to begin treatment of symptoms of autism early in an individual's life. Different specialists, such as a physician, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, or psychologist, can be part of the evaluation process for a diagnosis of autism. These individuals, along with parents/caregivers, can work together to help develop and implement intervention plans. Goals and objectives for interventions are to improve social interaction, communication, and/or behavior for better functioning in daily activities at school, home, and in the community.

Resources

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Autism Society of America. *About autism*. Retrieved April 7, 2009, from http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_home

Helpful Products

The list of Super Duper[®] products below may be helpful when working with children who have special needs. Visit www.superduperinc.com and type in the item name or number in our search engine. Click the links below to see the product description.

Autism – A Guide for Educators, Clinicians, and Parents
Item #TP-297

"I Have Autism" – A Child's First Look at Autism
Item #BK-329