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Understanding the Characteristics and Challenges of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Doctors and psychologists define Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as having a marked presence of two distinct disabilities: impairment in social communication, and restricted interests/restricted behavior. The differences in these areas are usually noticeable prior to three years of age.

Previously, ASD had many classifications and was an umbrella term that included Asperger's syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified, childhood disintegrative disorder, and autistic disorders. These subcategories are now included in the term "Autism Spectrum Disorders."



Diagnosis of ASD involves observing the individual's current or past communication skills, behaviors, and developmental levels. To meet the diagnostic criteria for ASD, an individual must show persistent deficits in social interaction/communication and restricted/repetitive patterns of behavior. It is possible for a child to display difficulty in using social language without displaying repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. This is now called social (pragmatic) communication disorder, and is not considered an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis.

After observing noticeable delays in developing language skills, a formal diagnosis usually occurs around the ages of 2 or 3. In older children, warning signs include unresponsiveness to his/her name, inability to play with toys, poor eye contact, odd movement patterns, not smiling, a tendency to line up toys or other items, or failure to follow any directions at all.

Children with ASDs develop at different rates in different areas of their growth due to some abnormality in the brain. Even though children with autism experience delays in language, their motor skills may be on par with other children their age. Complex activities like putting together a jigsaw puzzle or solving mathematical problems may come easily, while other very simple tasks like making friends or talking may be difficult.



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Symptoms of Autism

No two individuals exhibit the same symptoms of this disorder. Below are some of the most obvious characteristics of individuals with autism.

Savant skills



These skills fall into the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum. Individuals with savant skills may have special talents in music and art, mathematical aptitude, or even the ability to memorize large amounts of information, yet struggle with social interaction, changes in routine, and communication.

Impairment of one or more of the senses



Autism makes it difficult to process sensory information properly. Normal stimulation such as the sound of a car engine, a baby crying, or the sound of a running clothes dryer may be unbearable for some individuals.

Inability to speak or echolalia



About 40 percent of children with autism do not speak at all, while others may have echolalia (repeating something said to them or that they hear on TV or radio over and over and over). Their voices may also sound flat, and they may have no control over how loudly or softly they speak.

Repeated behaviors and routines



Individuals with autism insist on a "sameness" in their routines. For example, if a child brushes his/her teeth before dressing for bed, asking to reverse this routine can be quite upsetting. Hand flapping, biting, self injury, poor sleeping/eating habits, attention deficit, and insensitivity to pain are also typical with autism.



Autism is three to four times more likely to affect males than females and knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries. Family lifestyle, income, and educational levels do not affect the occurrence of autism.

If you suspect that your child may be exhibiting any of the above signs at or before the age of three, you should contact your pediatrician. Your pediatrician may refer you to a team of developmental specialists (psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, special instructors, and/or social workers) who will work together to identify any signs or symptoms of ASD. Following a diagnosis from the developmental team, the team will create an intervention program specifically for your child's needs.

Resources:

Center for the Study of Autism – www.autism.org
 Autism Society of America – www.autism-society.org
 The Mayo Clinic – www.mayoclinic.com
 American Speech and Hearing Association – www.asha.org
 Merrell, Heather– Autism and Education, Educational Dealer, June 2005, pages 34-37.
 American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing
 Answers to frequently asked questions about the DSM-5. (n.d.). Retrieved July 25, 2014, from Autism Speaks website: <http://www.autismspeaks.org/dsm-5/faq>

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