



What is Autism?

Autism is best described as a neurological disorder, though the exact nature of it has not yet been determined. It is a category of behavioural and developmental issues and challenges. A diagnosis means that “your child’s communication, social and play skills are affected in some way (p. 2).” This is determined by what your child’s doctor sees in behaviour and development during your child’s early years, between 24 months and 6 years.

The behavioural and developmental issues that your child is facing could be very mild to extreme, depending on where they are on the Autism Spectrum. The spectrum is a range of behaviours and patterns. Sometimes, it is hard for a parent to embrace an autism diagnosis because a child with autism can be affectionate and make eye contact. Just as no two children are alike, neither are two children with autism. It is important to note that, while a person with autism will have it for their entire life, the challenges will change as your child grows.

Making a diagnosis of autism depends on the number and pattern of symptoms, which may include:

1. Social development

- difficulty with group play or making friends
- limited awareness of others and their feelings
- preference to do things alone
- might not seem interested when you call his name or when others try to talk or play with him
- might show little interest in getting attention from others

2. Communication

- a limited understanding of language
- delayed speech
- difficulty in reading body language
- difficulty taking turns in conversation may be a challenge
- might not use his finger to point at things
- difficulty in making eye contact
- may seem grumpy or irritable (often caused by the frustration of not being able to effectively communicate needs or wants)

See other side for more information



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3. Specific behaviour patterns

- a need to have a strict routine and may dislike change
- repetitive behaviours such as asking the same questions or gross motor movement (eg, jumping or walking on their tippy-toes)
- sensory sensitivity (eg, a shirt might feel too scratchy to wear, sometimes it even seems painful)

Some of these symptoms may also be seen in a child without autism so it is important to have an evaluation by a professional. Because autism is difficult to diagnose, your child might have been diagnosed with a developmental delay, learning disability or hearing difficulty. These diagnoses are sometimes made before the diagnosis of autism. We encourage you to speak to your child's healthcare team if there is some confusion over the diagnoses.

Some of the characteristics of Asperger's syndrome may include social and communication issues and limited interests, but they have average intelligence and near average language development. For example, a child with Asperger's might seem like a mini-expert on airplanes, being able to tell you the differences between airplanes, how they take off, stay in the air, land and how and why the propellers work. Children with Asperger's might be incredibly knowledgeable about their interests!

However, children with Asperger's often have difficulty interacting with others because they may not understand other's viewpoints and feelings. This is where the communication and social deficits are apparent. For example, your child's friend might like to talk about airplanes, but your child's friend also wants a turn to talk about their interests. A child with Asperger's has difficulty understanding their friend's feelings.

A child with autism needs a great deal of support by a team of professionals which may include a physician, speech-language pathologist, neurologist, clinical psychologist, occupational therapist, social worker, nurse and/or an early interventionist. We will talk more about these roles and what they mean for your child later. As parents, you are your child's best advocate and will quickly become an active member of your child's healthcare team. No one knows your child quite like you do and the detailed information you share with your child's team is valuable in getting the right support for your child. With the right support, some of the behaviours that characterize an ASD can be changed. Early intervention can improve the quality of life for your child.

While he needs support for challenges, it is also important to build on your child's capabilities. Celebrating his achievements with acceptance and encouragement will contribute to your child's feelings of self-worth.

Stories from adults with ASD offer hope that your child can have a full and satisfying life.