

What is Autism/What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorder is a “wide spectrum” disorder because it describes a wide variety of individuals. Each person who has autism is different from everyone else who has autism. The symptoms or behaviors that describe autism can occur in any combination and with varying degrees of severity.

Autism is a neurological disorder (this means it is a concern with the brain and how it processes information) that makes it hard for a person to communicate and interact with others. Children who are diagnosed with autism have a variety of developmental concerns including 1) challenges with their speech/language skills, 2) challenges with social skills and 3) a restricted or repetitive repertoire of behavior (their play and behaviors are often different from that of other children their age).

A child with autism...

- may appear to not be able to hear even though their hearing is fine (hearing should *always* be checked in case there is a hearing loss that can explain developmental delays and behavior). Often they do not respond to their name but may hear other sounds well, even relatively quiet sounds, and respond to them
- may seem unaware of what is happening, even what is happening right around them
- may appear withdrawn from people and/or activities
- may have uneven skill development, so can do some things well, like other children their age or even older can do, but then cannot do other things that children much younger can do. Skills that children with autism often can do well are activities like puzzles and matching because the solution is the same each time. Some children with autism learn to recognize numbers and letters very early.
- may not imitate others' actions, sounds, and/or speech like other kids usually do
- may fail to develop language or may develop language later or differently from other children
- may not communicate needs and wants but, instead, will wait for an adult to figure out what they want or will just get what they want on their own or will lead parents/other adults by the hand to have them get what they want
- may show little or no response to requests or show a delay in responding
- may exhibit repetitive patterns of motor movements or actions, like spinning, hand flapping, etc. May seek opportunities for excessive or ongoing sensory stimulation – there can be lots of movement and/or repetitive behavior
- may not point with an index finger to show (“pointing to show” is when a child sees an object of interest, he looks at an adult and gets his or her eye contact so he knows that the adult is paying attention to him, then points to the object as he looks back at object). Children with autism often will point to request.
- may not follow the point of others when someone is pointing, trying to show something to him
- may not bring special/interesting objects to parents or others to show/share
- initiation of social contacts with adults or peers may be absent or appear awkward
- may display little or no desire to “please” parents by following rules, etc./can be very hard to discipline
- may show little or no direct or sustained eye contact with familiar people and/or may use eye contact in unusual ways – sometimes may avoid eye contact and sometimes may stare.
- may have a lack of pretend play or there might be some pretend play but it may not develop and change over time. It may not get more complicated – it may look about the same month to month - they may not act out a scene or story like other kids do.
- may not enjoy cuddling and/or may only want to be cuddled/held in certain ways/at certain times
- may like things to be the same and get upset when they are not
- may have no real fears or sense of danger
- may have an unusual display of emotions – may laugh, cry, scream, etc. for no apparent reason
- may have a high tolerance for pain

Only a professional like a doctor or psychologist can diagnose autism. However, there is no blood test or brain test or any kind of medical test to “prove” a person has autism. We can help you find a doctor who can talk to you about whether or not your child might have autism if you would like to do that. Some families want a diagnosis because it can be helpful to know; a diagnosis helps some families understand their children better and also there are strategies that have been shown to help children with autism learn. In some cases, having a diagnosis can help a child get specific services. Other families choose not to get a diagnosis and want to wait and see how their children progress over time.

What we know about children who do have autism is that they all learn, develop, change and make progress.