

Autism

Autism is a puzzling disorder. It is difficult to understand the behaviour of people with autism, and the world is confusing for the child who suffers from it. Autism affects approximately one in 1,000 Australians. Boys are more likely to be affected than girls.

Autism is a developmental disability thought to be a brain disorder. A person with autism has difficulties in some areas of their development, but other areas may be unaffected. The areas most affected are communication, social interaction and behaviour.

Signs of autism

Communication is difficult. People with autism often have difficulty understanding the meaning and purpose of body language and the spoken and written word. They may misunderstand words, interpret them literally or not understood at all. Other people's feelings and emotions can also be difficult to understand.

Social interaction is confusing

Social interaction is an essential part of life for most people. People with autism find being sociable difficult, scary and confusing. Some people appear to withdraw and become isolated; others try very hard to be sociable but never seem to get it right. People with autism can find friendships difficult.

Behaviours linked with autism

Difficulties with communication and social interaction produce a range of behaviours that have become linked with autism. These may include:

- **Speech** - absent, delayed or abnormal patterns.
- **Play** - isolated, repetitive, unimaginative, destructive and obsessive.
- **Body movements** - stereotypical behaviour (such as flapping and toe walking) and other behaviours that may cause self-injury (such as hand biting).
- **Obsessional behaviour** - with favourite topics, objects, places, people or activities.
- **Rituals** - rituals and routines bring some order to chaos and confusion. A change to routine can be very difficult to cope with.
- **Tantrums** - can be a way to express extreme confusion and/or frustration.
- **Sensory sensitivities** - to certain sounds, colours, tastes, smells and textures.

Type of help available

- **Assessment** - a detailed, multidisciplinary assessment should ensure a proper diagnosis. Some children show signs of autism by the age of two, but a firm diagnosis may not be possible until three or older.
- **Education programs** - the educational needs of each child vary. Intensive, specialised programs may be desirable for some children with autism while the needs of other children may be met by non-specialist early intervention or mainstream services depending on the child's level of functioning and need. Children may benefit greatly from being with their peers, and parents will need to choose between regular or specialist schools for their child to attend.
- **Parent support** - the family is likely to need some support. Parents may need specialised services, such as respite and residential care (child care help), social skills training and living skills training.

Where to get help

- Your family doctor
- Specialist Children's Services Teams, Department of Human Services. Tel. 1800 783 783 (ask for Specialist Children's Services)

- Autism Victoria - Tel. (03) 9885 0533

Things to remember

- People with autism find communication and socialising difficult.
- A firm diagnosis may not be possible under three years of age.
- Parents may need regular breaks.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DHS - Children Youth & Families

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