



Teenage Life

What is autism?

The National Autistic Society Autism helpline 0808 800 4104

What is autism?

Some of the basic facts about autism

- Autism first properly described and identified in 1940s by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger
Although autism has always been around, it is only in the past 75 years that we have really started to diagnose people with the disability. We are still learning about autism and how it affects people.
- Most common names for the condition are autism, Asperger syndrome and ASD.
The diagnosis your child was given may vary according to which professional made it and their preference for which term to use.

The terms autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autism spectrum condition (ASC) are often used because autism is a wide spectrum and people can be affected in all kinds of different ways. Also how autism affects your child will vary during their lifetime.

The term Asperger syndrome is used less now by doctors when they actually diagnose – they are more likely to just use the terms autism or autism spectrum condition. (However, the term Asperger syndrome is still useful and will probably continue to be used by individuals and families affected by autism, as well as professionals.)

- Can affect people with learning disability and those with very high IQ scores
Autism can affect anyone regardless of IQ. So there are people with autism who also have a learning disability (average IQ below about 70), as well as people who have autism and an average IQ and people who have autism and a very high IQ.
- Autism including Asperger syndrome may affect about 1 in 100 people
Different figures have been quoted over the years. The current belief is that autism and Asperger syndrome are far more common than previously thought.
- An invisible disability
Autism and Asperger syndrome are still not very well understood by many support services or the general public – it is sometimes therefore considered an invisible disability. People with autism do not usually look different physically - their difficulties are sometimes not obvious until you really get to know them.
- Genetic and other causes
The exact cause of autism is still being investigated. However, research suggests that a combination of factors – genetic and environmental – may account for changes in brain development. Autism is not caused by parenting!

- More males than females are diagnosed
The exact ratio of males to females is not known, but more boys than girls get diagnosed with autism. It may be that autism affects girls in a different way to boys and until fairly recently this was not noticed so well by those who diagnose.
- Brain differences
People with autism or Asperger syndrome have actual brain differences that account for the particular differences in behavior and social communication your child has. Research is ongoing to see which parts of the brain are affected and how.
- There is no medical cure but with support and education people can achieve a lot
There has been a great increase in knowledge about the best ways to support people with autism. We also know that all people with autism have great potential so there is reason to remain optimistic about their future. Accessing the right support at the right time is the key to success.

We are learning all the time about what autism. Keep an open mind to research and new information. www.researchautism.net is a useful starting point to find out about new research and 'what works'.

How does autism feel?

The following quote is just one person's experience, but many children and adults with autism will probably feel like this from time to time:

"Reality to an autistic person is a confusing interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights... A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything..."

Set routines, times and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life."
(Therese Joliffe, a woman with Asperger syndrome)

So life can feel chaotic and scary at times for your child. The more you can help them feel at ease, safe, accepted and provide clear communication, the happier they will be. The more information you can give them about what is going on in the world and people around them, the better.

We are always learning about the best ways to help people with autism feel at home in the world and reach their potential. So continue to listen carefully to what your child is telling you in their communication and with their behaviour about what their needs are and what they want out of life.

What is autism?

For a person to be diagnosed with autism the symptoms and behaviours must be significant and present from birth or early on:

- Social interaction and communication
- Restricted repetitive behaviours, interests or activities (may include marked sensory processing differences)

Social interaction difficulties include:

- Making and keeping friends
- Understanding the unwritten rules of behaviour
- Not knowing how to respond to other people

Some other difficulties with social interaction your child may have:

- Finds it hard to understand relationships
- Struggles to cope with teenage communication and behaviour
- Does not share the same interests as peers
- Finds it difficult to give and take in friendships
- May approach others but may appear 'odd' or the contact may be inappropriate
- Feelings of sexuality may be confusing and frustrating

Social communication difficulties include:

- using language socially
- understanding the spoken word
- reading faces
- understanding other non-verbal communication

Some other difficulties with social communication your child may have:

- Preferring to be alone – avoiding social contact
- Misunderstanding situations and reacting unusually as a result
- Difficulty in identifying other peoples' motives
- Difficulty processing instructions
- Interrupting other peoples' conversations
- Taking things literally
- Talking a lot about one subject, sometimes even when the listener is not very interested
- Difficulty understanding how young people communicate

Restricted repetitive behaviours, interests or activities (may include marked sensory processing differences)

- Having inflexible thoughts and being rigid in behaviour
- May have unusual processing of sensory information

Some other restricted repetitive behaviours, interests or activities difficulties with your child may have:

- Find it difficult to make choices – either day to day or major life changing decisions
- Like routines - struggle to cope with unexpected change
- Find planning and organising their life very hard – eg meeting deadlines, keeping tidy and organised
- Fear of unusual or unpredictable situations
- May be ‘obsessively’ interested in certain objects or subjects
- May have no sense of danger
- May not pick up on how others are feeling

Sensory sensitivities

Although not part of the diagnosis your child may show differences in the way they process sensory information in the following areas:

- sight
- touch, pain
- hearing
- taste
- smell
- temperature
- vestibular (balance, co-ordination etc)
- proprioception (body position awareness)

Senses may be over or under sensitive and vary during the day/week

Some of the difficulties with sensory processing your son/daughter may have

- Avoid or become distressed by certain situations because of sensory issues such as smells, noise or light
- Avoid touch.
- Not like wearing certain clothes or prefer to wear no clothes!
- Find it difficult to eat some foods/ narrow diet
- Show an unusual reaction to pain
- Easily distracted by surroundings
- Avoiding showers
- Dressing inappropriately on hot or cold days

- Not always aware of body position/distance from others
- Difficulty judging distances
- Difficulty modulating their voice
- Avoiding participation in team sport because of their clumsiness and lack of coordination

Other disabilities common to people with autism

Your child may also have other difficulties or disabilities as well as autism. The following are quite common for people with autism:

- Dyslexia (difficulties with reading and writing not related to a general learning difficulty)
- Dyspraxia (difficulties with co-ordination and movement)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder - ADHD (impulsive, restless, always on the move, short attention span, need for multiple input to maintain concentration)
- Learning difficulties – general or specific (a lower than average IQ or a specific difficulty with one aspect of learning)
- Language or speech problems (for example may not speak at all, stutter or be mute)

Other difficulties common to people with autism

- Anxiety
- Low mood
- Sleep
- Diet/eating
- Irrational fears/phobias
- Tics – physical and /or verbal (make involuntary movements, noises, or say particular words or phrases especially when stressed)
- Motivation
- Anger and meltdowns due to frustration with communication or sensory overload

These difficulties are common in children and young people with autism, and will occur in most families affected by autism. How you parent your child will affect these behavior difficulties, but these problems are not in themselves caused by parents.

Qualities and strengths

There are lots of strengths in the way your son/daughter thinks and how they see the world. We should celebrate these qualities, skills and differences.

Building self esteem is the number one priority for people with autism during childhood. So the more we can develop your child's sense of self-worth the better.

Not all people with autism have these particular strengths. The following are just a few examples:

- Different way of seeing the world!
- Can have strong sense of justice
- Fewer social inhibitions
- Sensory enjoyment
- Attention to detail
- Technical skills
- Determination
- Good factual memory
- Ability to concentrate
- Fascination in area of interest
- More honest/openness
- Happy in own company

Help your child to appreciate their qualities, strengths and differences in themselves and others can be very helpful to their self-esteem. Encouraging other people to appreciate differences will also make for a more tolerant and understanding society.