

Autism

Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the U.S. Currently, 1 in 150 births will be diagnosed with the disability. If diagnosed early on, the cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 66%.

--Autism Society of America

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), also known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs), cause severe and pervasive impairment in thinking, feeling, language and the ability to relate to others. These disorders are usually first diagnosed in early childhood and range from a severe form, called autistic disorder, through pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), to a much milder form, Asperger syndrome. They also include two rare disorders, Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder.

Signs & Symptoms

Parents are usually the first to notice unusual

behaviors in their child. In some cases, the baby seemed “different” from birth, unresponsive to people or focusing intently on one item for long periods of time. The first signs of an autism spectrum disorder can also appear in children who had been developing normally. When an affectionate, babbling toddler suddenly becomes silent, withdrawn, self-abusive, or indifferent to social overtures, something is wrong. Possible Indicators of Autism Spectrum Disorders can be:

- Does not babble, point, or make meaningful gestures by 1 year of age
- Does not speak one word by 16 months
- Does not combine two words by 2 years
- Does not respond to name
- Loses language or social skills

Some Other Indicators can be:

- Poor eye contact
- Doesn't seem to know how to play with toys
- Excessively lines up toys or other objects



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- Is attached to one particular toy or object
- Doesn't smile
- At times seems to be hearing impaired

Treatment

There is no single best treatment package for all children with ASD. One point that most professionals agree on is that early intervention is important; another is that most individuals with ASD respond well to highly structured, specialized programs.

Before you make decisions on your child's treatment, you will want to gather information about the various options available. Learn as much as you can, look at all the options, and make your decision on your child's treatment based on your child's needs. You may want to visit public schools in your area to see the type of program they offer to special needs children.

Guidelines used by the Autism Society of America include the following questions



parents can ask about potential treatments:

- Will the treatment result in harm to my child?
- How will failure of the treatment affect my child and family?
- Has the treatment been validated scientifically?
- Are there assessment procedures specified?
- How will the treatment be integrated into my child's current program? *Do not become so infatuated with a given treatment that functional curriculum, vocational life, and social skills are ignored.*

Whatever treatment plan you and your child's doctors decide on, it should build on your child's interests, offer a predictable schedule, teach tasks as a series of simple steps, actively engage your child's attention in highly structured activities, and provide regular reinforcement of behavior. Parental involvement has emerged as a major factor in treatment success. Parents work with teachers and therapists to identify the behaviors to be changed and the skills to be taught. Recognizing that parents are the child's earliest teachers, more programs are beginning to train parents to continue the therapy at home.

Medications Used in Treatment

Medications are often used to treat behavioral problems, such as aggression, self-injurious behavior, and severe tantrums, that keep the person with ASD from functioning more effectively at home or school. The medications used are those that have been developed to treat similar symptoms in other disorders. Many of these medications are prescribed "off-label". This means

they have not been officially approved by the FDA for use in children, but the doctor prescribes the medications if he or she feels they are appropriate for your child. Further research needs to be done to ensure not only the efficacy but the safety of psychotropic agents used in the treatment of children and adolescents.

A child with ASD may not respond in the same way to medications as typically developing children. **It is important that parents work with a doctor who has experience with children with autism.** A child should be monitored closely while taking a medication. The doctor will prescribe the lowest dose possible to be effective. Ask the doctor about any side effects the medication may have and keep a record of how your child responds to the medication. It will be helpful to read the "patient insert" that comes with your child's medication. Some people keep the patient inserts in a small notebook to be used as a reference. This is most useful when several medications are prescribed.

For more information on autism, log on to the National Institute of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov.

For more information about Nationwide Better Health visit: www.nwbetterhealth.com
Or contact your benefits representative.



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