

Autism Coalition

Autism Advocates

Frequently asked Question about Autism

What is autism?

Autism, part of a group of disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), is a complex neurobiological disorder that typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. The disorder is characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills and social abilities, and also by repetitive behaviors. Symptoms range from mild to severe. One milder form of the disorder is known as Asperger Syndrome. Other developmental disorders that fall under the Autism Spectrum Disorders are Rett Syndrome, PDD NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder), and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child or their child's failure to reach appropriate developmental milestones. Some parents describe a child that seemed different from birth, while others describe a child who was developing normally and then lost skills. If you have concerns about your child's development, don't wait: speak to your pediatrician about getting your child screened for autism.

What does it mean to be “on the spectrum”?

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means it manifests itself in many different forms. A diagnosis can range from mild to severe, and though children who have it (i.e. are on the spectrum) are likely to exhibit similar traits, they're also as individual as the colors of a rainbow, each one managing a grab bag of symptoms. While one child may rarely speak and have difficulty learning how to read and write, another can be so high-functioning he's able to attend classes in a mainstream school. Yet another child may be so sensitive to the feel of fabric that all tags must be cut off before he wears a piece of clothing, while his friend who's also autistic may not have any sensory issues at all.

How common is autism?

As many as 1 in 150 children are autistic, according to the Centers for Disease Control. That adds up to almost 1.5 million people in the United States. Also, government statistics suggest the rate of autism is rising 10-17 percent annually. Unfortunately, the numbers appear to be continuing their upward climb. In fact, it is the most prevalent developmental disorder to date; according to the Centers for Disease Control, of the approximately 4 million babies born every year, 24,000 of them will eventually be identified as autistic. Also, recent studies suggest boys are more susceptible than girls to developing autism. In the United States alone, 1 out of 94 boys are suspected of being on the spectrum, with perhaps more going undiagnosed to this day. That said, girls appear to manifest a more severe form of the disorder than their male counterparts.

How does a child develop autism?

No one knows for sure. Though it's understandable to expect that a disorder as common as autism would have a known cause, in many ways it's still quite mysterious. Recent studies suggest a strong genetic basis for autism -- up to 20 sets of genes may play a part in its development. Genetics alone, however, can't account for all the cases, and so scientists are also looking into possible environmental origins, as well as other triggers.

Is there a cure for autism?

Unfortunately, experts have been unable thus far to come up with a cure for autism. Many "treatments" have surfaced since the disorder has grown more visible in the mainstream press, but reputable doctors have yet to agree on any that will reverse the diagnosis. But there's hope: Scientists are hard at work every day finding a solution for this growing problem. Until such cure is discovered, parents have been relying on early intervention programs such as applied behavior analysis, or ABA, and play therapy to mitigate the behaviors associated with autism. For some, these treatments have proven to be very successful, helping kids on the spectrum lead a full and active life.

How can I tell if a child is autistic?

No two autistic kids are alike, but there are some signs that many of them share and that experts agree may be as recognizable as early as the toddler years, or even sooner. Children on the spectrum generally have difficulty relating to others; they may hardly speak, and if they do, they may not communicate in ways that other people can easily understand (they may screech loudly when they're upset, for example, instead of crying). They don't usually sustain eye contact – it's too intense -- and have trouble reading social cues. They're also prone to repetitive behaviors, flapping their hands constantly or uttering the same phrase over and over again. They may also be more sensitive than typically developing children, or dramatically less so, to sights, sounds and touch.