



## Autism Association of the ACT Inc

Postal: S.H.O.U.T, PO Box 717, Mawson, ACT, 2607

Telephone: (02) 6290 1984 \* Facsimile: 02 6286 4475

Email: [autism@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:autism@coombs.anu.edu.au) Internet: <http://autism.anu.edu.au/>

### **What Is Autism?**<sup>1</sup>

Autism is believed to result from problems in the way a person's central nervous system functions, in particular how it processes and organises information. The causes of autism are not known for certain and there are many theories. There does not appear to be a single cause. What is true, however, is that the style of parenting used for raising and managing children does not cause autism.

Autism is life-long. There is no cure, although with early diagnosis, appropriate therapy and educational programs, it is possible in many cases to make significant progress. With appropriate therapy and educational intervention the impairments that an autistic child has may diminish, however, they will always exist to some extent. Consequently, a person with autism will always need some form of assistance, depending upon their level of disability. People with autism vary enormously in terms of their personalities, intelligence levels, skills, behaviour, ability to interact with others and participate in the world around them. When diagnosed, usually as children, autistic people had significant impairment in three specific areas of their development: communication, social skills, and flexible, adaptive behaviour.

**Communication** - People with autism have significant difficulties communicating with others. The type and extent of difficulties varies widely. Autistic people generally have difficulty expressing themselves and understanding what other people say and mean, especially when referring to more abstract concepts. While some autistic people can speak fairly well, other people may have a very limited ability to speak despite having normal intelligence as measured by non-verbal tests. Learning at school will be very limited unless the type and extent of communication difficulties are identified. Strategies must be tailored to the specific needs of the child. They must be carried out to help the child understand instructions and learn.

**Social Skills** - People with autism have significant difficulties forming relationships with other people. Autistic people struggle to understand social rules governing relationships and interactions, rules that everyone else takes for granted. As a result, they can be unresponsive to or rejecting of attempts by others to interact with them. If no adult help is given, an autistic child remains isolated from other people, because other children give up trying to initiate interactions and play, both in the classroom and playground.

**Flexible Behaviour** - People with autism have very inflexible behaviour and a very restricted range of interests and activities. They like to follow exact daily routines. They may be very attached to seemingly ordinary objects, such as stones, and insist that these be always carried with them. The same body movement may be repeated over and over again (e.g. finger flicking), or objects may be used in a very narrow way (e.g. lining up pencils). When these obsessional activities or routines are unexpectedly interrupted or changed, an autistic person can become very distressed.

For people with autism the everyday world may be unpredictable and frightening and all the more so for children with autism. As a result, autistic people of all ages may become anxious or distressed and display behaviour that is difficult to manage. Family, friends and teachers face the enormous task of reaching into the autistic person's world, trying to understand what is being experienced, and finding ways to help the child learn and overcome fears.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a package designed by the West Australian Disability Services Commission, Perth.

## The Autism Spectrum

The three areas described above are known as the *Autistic Triad*. Impairments in these three areas are experienced in varying but debilitating degrees by all children diagnosed as having autism. Autism is one of four disorders known collectively as *Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD)*<sup>2</sup>. It is now usual to talk of *Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)* rather than “autism” (though this term is still used colloquially), because research has shown that there is a range of related developmental disorders. They are:

- Autistic Disorder;
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder - very rare with later onset than autism;
- Asperger’s Syndrome - children tend to have higher abilities overall with the main difficulties occurring with social understanding and interactions; and
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder/Not Otherwise Specified (PDD/NOS) - diagnosed when the child has severe impairment in the three key areas but does not fulfill the requirements for one of the other three subcategories.

The term *Autism* or now *Autism Spectrum Disorders* rather than *Pervasive Developmental Disorders* is often used to describe children who are diagnosed with any of the four related subcategories.

## Other characteristics associated with Autism

*Abnormal response to sensory stimulation:* People with ASD may be distressed by various sounds, sights, tastes, smells and touch sensations. Alternatively, they may fail to recognise and cue into normal sensations such as their teacher’s voice. Examples include:

- sounds can be distressing and difficult to relate to their origin (eg a person’s voice talking at a certain pitch or the sound of the school siren);
- smells and tastes that are acceptable to other people may be objectionable to a person with autism
- proximity to others can be stressful (e.g. sitting on a crowded mat, a teacher leaning over to correct work or an unexpected touch from another child); and
- flashing lights may cause great distress.

*Abnormalities in eating:* Children may have very restricted diets despite efforts by parents and professionals to introduce new and varied foods.

*Disturbed sleep patterns:* Children may have difficulty sleeping at night. This can have considerable negative impact on family sleep patterns.

*Distorted perception of danger.* Children may not recognise the danger associated with traffic, electricity, heaters, fans and other similar situations or objects.

## What is the prognosis for children with Autism?

- Autism is a life-long developmental disability. This means that the manifestation of the disorder varies with the age and developmental level of the child or adult concerned.
- There is no cure for autism. Early intervention and well designed, structured, educational programs tailored to a child’s specific needs will help to develop academic and life skills to the of the child’s potential. Many children experience a significant reduction in impairment. The degree of progress varies between individuals. Whatever the level of progress, in all cases, the impairments will never be eliminated completely.
- Autism can co-exist with other conditions, for example intellectual disability, Fragile X Syndrome, or epilepsy.

## How common is Autism?

Owing to the advance in knowledge and ongoing research, the level of incidence is not agreed. What is agreed is that ASD is more common than previously thought. Recent research suggests that ASD affects, to some degree or another, one person in one hundred. Most of these people are thought to be high functioning people with Asperger’s syndrome who may never be diagnosed. Their behaviour may be regarded as obsessional or eccentric, but they will be able to function, with more or less difficulty, in the community.

- Autism is four times more common in boys than girls.
- It is estimated that there are approximately one in every two hundred children are likely to have impairments that are associated with the PDD subcategory Autistic Disorder.

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<sup>2</sup> As defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 4th edition (DSM-IV). The DSM-IV also includes Rett’s Disorder under Pervasive Developmental Disorders. This is a degenerative, genetic disorder only found in girls that appears to be qualitatively different in nature to other Pervasive Developmental Disorders.

## **Getting Help**

The Autism Association of the ACT, Inc is a volunteer-run support and advocacy group. It provides support and information for people with ASD, their families, carers, teachers, therapists and other interested people. Activities include:

- A monthly meeting at which there is a speaker and discussion;
- Seminars, workshops and focus groups and other social activities;
- Information on, and assistance obtaining, services;
- A news sheet seven times a year and a larger newsletter three times a year.

Please contact the Association if you would like further information:

**Autism Association of the ACT, Inc**  
SHOUT Offices  
PO Box 717  
Mawson ACT 2067

Phone: 02 6290 1984  
Fax: 02 6286 4475  
Email: [autism@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:autism@coombs.anu.edu.au)  
Internet: <http://autism.anu.edu.au>