



Autism Association of the ACT Inc

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Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Continuing Puzzle

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 and there are many theories. There does not appear to be a single cause. What is true is that the style of parenting with children does not cause autism.

Autism is life-long. There is no cure, although with early diagnosis, appropriate therapy and educational programs, significant progress may be made. As a child grows older, the impairments that he or she has may have usually diminish with appropriate therapy and educational intervention. However, they will always exist to some extent. 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.

As children all people with ASD 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 and strategies tailored to the specific needs of the child are put in place to help the child to understand instructions and to 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 (eg finger flicking), or objects may be used in a very narrow way (eg lining up pencils). When these obsessional activities or routines are unexpectedly interrupted or changed, a child can become very distressed.

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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 child's world, trying to understand what is being experienced and finding ways to help the child learn and overcome fears.

How does ASD reveal itself in each person?

ASD manifests itself in a wide variety of ways; however, they can be summarised in the following areas:

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 child with autism
- proximity to others can be stressful (eg 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.

A day in the life....

What is life like for a person with ASD? Confusing, fearful, frustrating, distressing, anxious. These are some of the words that people with ASD use to describe their perception of the world. The more affected a person is, the more intense these feelings.

If you would like more information, please contact the Association.

The Autism Association of the ACT, Inc

The Autism Association is a voluntary organisation. It works to improve the life and opportunities for people with Autism Spectrum Disorders, their families and carers. The Association is a non-profit charitable organisation. All Donations to the Association are tax deductible. The Association provides:

- Support to people who have ASD, their families, carers, teachers and therapists;
- Information on autism;, on living with ASD, and Information on the services available in the ACT;
- Advocacy to improve services and opportunities;
- Close work with service providers to improve service delivery;
- Seminars and workshops and information forums;
- A newsletter, "Autism Awareness";
- Monthly meetings and speakers.

Membership of the Association is open to any person with ASD, their family, carers, teachers or other interested person. If you would like to join the Association or attend our meetings or assist in any other way, please contact us at the SHOUT offices.

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