

What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. The result of a neurological disorder that affects functioning of the brain, autism and its associated behaviors have been estimated to occur in as many as 1 in 500 individuals.

Autism is four times more prevalent in boys than girls and knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries. Family income, lifestyle and educational levels do not affect the chance of autism's occurrence.

Autism impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Children and adults with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions and leisure or play activities. The disorder makes it hard for them to communicate with others and relate to the outside world. They may exhibit repeated body movements (hand flapping, rocking), unusual responses to people or attachments to objects and resist any changes in routines. In some cases, aggressive and/or self-injurious behavior may be present.

Over one half million people in the U.S. today have some form of autism. Its prevalence rate now places it as the third most common developmental disability - more common than Down's syndrome. Yet the majority of the public, including many professionals in the medical, educational, and vocational fields are still unaware of how autism affects people and how to work effectively with individuals with autism. Is there More than One Type of Autism? Autism is often referred to as a spectrum disorder, meaning that the symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations, from mild to severe. Although autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, children and adults can exhibit any combination of the behaviors in any degree of severity. Two children, both with a diagnosis of autism, can act very differently from one another.

Professionals utilize a diagnostic handbook, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual now in its fourth edition (DSM-IV). Several autism-related disorders are grouped under the broad heading "Pervasive Developmental Disorder" or PDD: Autism, PDD-NOS (pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified), Asperger's syndrome and Rett's syndrome. These four diagnoses are used differently by professionals to describe individuals who manifest some, but not all, of the autism characteristics.

The diagnosis of autism is made when a specified number of characteristics listed in the DSM-IV are present, in ranges inappropriate for the child's age. In contrast, a diagnosis of PDD-NOS may be made when a child exhibits fewer symptoms than in autism, although the those symptoms may be exactly the same as a child with an autism diagnosis. Asperger's and Rett's syndrome display the most marked differences from autism.

Therefore, most professional will agree that there is no standard "type" or "typical" person with autism. Parents may hear more than one label applied to the same child: autistic-like, learning disabled with autistic tendencies, high functioning or low functioning autism. These labels don't describe differences between the children as much as they indicate differences between the professionals' training, vocabulary, and exposure to autism.

The differences in children's behaviors are often very subtle. Each diagnosis relies on observation of the child and the whether or not the professional is well educated on autism will certainly affect which label is used. Many professionals believe that the distinction between autism and PDD-NOS is not significant. Some believe they are "sparing" the parents by giving a diagnosis of PDD-NOS rather than autism. Many professionals still argue whether or not Asperger's is really a form of autism. What is most important to understand is that whatever the autism diagnosis, children are likely to benefit from similar approaches to education and treatment.



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