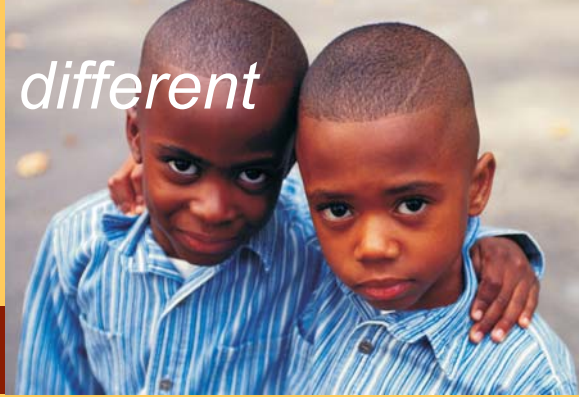


everyone is *different*



AUTISM FACT SHEET

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that begins at birth or during the first 3 years of life, and can be severely incapacitating. Approximately 1.5 million people in the United States live with the effects of autism spectrum disorder. The incidence is 1 of every 100 if a broader definition of autism is used. In the broader category would be both people with classic autism and others with varying degrees of autistic behavior. Autism is three to four times more common in males than females, and has been found throughout the world in families of all racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. It is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States.

What are the symptoms of autism?

- Slow development or lack of physical, social and learning skills.
- Immature rhythms of speech, limited understanding of ideas, and use of words without attaching the usual meaning to them.
- Abnormal responses to sensations. For example, a child's sight, hearing, touch, pain, balance, smell, taste, the way a child holds his body, or a combination of these responses may be affected.
- Abnormal ways of relating to people, objects and events.

When tested, approximately 60% of those with autism have I.Q. scores below 50; 20% between 50 and 70; and 20% greater than 70. Most show wide variations in performance on different tests at different times. Some children with autism have distinct skills in music, mathematics, or in using spatial concepts (e.g. working jigsaw puzzles), but may manifest severe delays in other areas.

What causes autism?

There appear to be several possible causes, either alone or in combination with others. Among these are untreated phenylketonuria, rubella, celiac disease, and chemical exposure in pregnancy. Biochemical imbalance and genetic predisposition have also emerged as possible causes. No known factors in the psychological environment of a child have been shown to cause autism.

How is it diagnosed?

Because there are no medical tests for autism at present, the diagnosis must be based on observations of the child's behavior. Sometimes the process of elimination is the only guide. For older children whose early symptoms have changed, it may be necessary to interview the parents about the child's early years in order to avoid misdiagnosis.

Is autism ever associated with other disorders?

Autism occurs either by itself or in association with other disorders which affect brain function. Prenatal viral infections, some metabolic disturbances, epilepsy, or mental retardation may result or exist in conjunction with autistic-like behaviors.

How severe can autism be?

In milder forms, autism most resembles a learning disability such as childhood aphasia. Because it is a spectrum disorder, some people with autism are substantially impaired.

With approximately 3% of those disposed, severe autism may cause extreme forms of self-injurious, repetitive, highly unusual, and aggressive behavior. The behavior may persist and be very difficult to change, posing a tremendous challenge to those who must manage, treat and teach individuals with autism.

People with autism live normal life spans. Since certain symptoms may change or even disappear over time, persons with autism should be re-evaluated periodically and their treatment adjusted to meet their changing needs.

What are the most effective treatments?

While various methods of treatment have been tried, no single treatment is effective in all cases. Appropriate programming, based on individual functioning level and need, is of prime importance. Although there is no known cure, substantial strides can be made.

Education

Highly structured, skill-oriented training, tailored to the individual, has proven most helpful. Social and language skills should be developed as much as possible. Thought must also be given to avoiding secondary handicaps, such as loss of muscle tone when inactivity is a problem.

Counseling

Supportive counseling may be helpful for families with members who have autism, just as it is for other families with members who have lifelong disabilities. Physicians can usually advise parents as to counseling services available. Care must be taken to avoid unenlightened counselors who erroneously believe that parental attitudes and behavior cause autism.

Medication/Diet

In the types of autism where metabolic abnormalities can be identified, controlled diet and/or medication can be beneficial. Examples are those whose autism is caused by an excess of uric acid in the blood, or whose autism is aggravated by nutritional imbalances. Also, proper monitored medication to decrease specific symptoms can help some autistic individuals live more satisfactory lives.

What research is being done?

Ongoing study is necessary to determine how autism occurs and to identify ways to prevent or alleviate its effects. Basic research in a broad spectrum of scientific disciplines is needed to shed further light on the challenges presented by autism. Currently, the National Institute of Health is supporting research, as are such organizations as Autism Speaks, the Autism Society of America and the Autism Treatment Network.



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