



## Autism Resource Guide

### Overview<sup>i</sup>

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is marked by two unusual kinds of behaviors: deficits in communication and social skills, and restricted or repetitive behaviors.

The term<sup>ii</sup> “spectrum” refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills, and levels of impairment or disability that children with ASD can have. Some children are mildly impaired by their symptoms, while others are severely disabled.

### What Are the Signs Of Autism?<sup>iii</sup>

When an infant or toddler:

- does not cuddle or respond to affection and touching.
- does not make eye contact.
- appears to be unable to communicate.
- displays persistent failure to develop two-way social relationships in any situation.
- does not show a preference for parents over other adults.
- does not develop friendships with other children.
- has poor language skills; or nonexistent ones.
- shows unusual, extreme responses to objects – either avoidance or preoccupation.
- finds moving objects, such as a fan, hold great fascination.
- may form an unusual attachment to odd objects such as a paper or rubber band.
- displays repetitive activities of a restrictive range.
- spins and repeats body movements, such as arm flapping.
- may repeat television commercials.
- may indulge in complex bedtime rituals.

The symptoms of autism range from mild to severe. Although symptoms of the disorder sometimes can be seen in early infancy, the condition may appear after months of normal development. About 7 in every 10 children and adolescents with autism also have mental retardation or other problems with their brain function or structure.

### Causes<sup>iii</sup>

Researchers are unsure about what causes autism. Several studies suggest that autistic disorder might be caused by a combination of biological factors, including exposure to a virus before birth, a problem with the immune system, or genetics.

### Treatment<sup>i</sup>

Autism cannot be cured at the present time, but a structured educational program and tailored therapy have been shown to help children develop skills they are lacking and minimize



behaviors that are problematic.

*Applied behavior analysis* is a psychotherapeutic regimen that actively teaches and encourages desired social and communication behaviors that other children learn intuitively. An approach called developmentally based intervention uses subjects, words, and stimuli to model a typical developmental progression for a child who doesn't develop them independently. As every child is different, other appropriate therapies may include occupational, physical, and speech-language.

There is no medicine that can treat autism itself, but there are medications that target associated behaviors that create problems for children with autism and their families, such as sleep disturbance and violent tantrums.

### **Autism Affects the Whole Family<sup>iii</sup>**

In addition to working with a child with autism, the child and adolescent psychiatrist can help the family resolve stress – for example, a feeling among the siblings that they are being neglected in favor of the child with autism, or embarrassment about bringing their friends home. The child and adolescent psychiatrist can help parents with the emotional problems that may arise as a result of living with a child with autism and also help them provide the best possible nurturing and learning environment for the child.

### **Resources for the Parents<sup>iii</sup>**

The parents of an autistic child bear a heavy burden. They are frustrated by the child's inability to communicate; impulsiveness; emotional unresponsiveness; self-destructive behavior; and eating and toileting problems. Some parents find it difficult to accept the diagnosis and constantly look for other explanations. Many cope well enough, but all can benefit from some guidance and services, including counseling or supportive psychotherapy.

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<sup>i</sup> Child Mind Institute (2015). Quick Facts on Autism. <http://www.childmind.org/en/quick-facts-autism/>

<sup>ii</sup> National Institute of Mental Health (2015). Autism Spectrum Disorder. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>

<sup>iii</sup> Mental Health America (2015). Autism. <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/autism>