

More Information about Symptoms of Autism

Autism affects the way an individual perceives the world and makes communication and social interaction difficult. Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterized by social-interaction difficulties, communication challenges and a tendency to engage in repetitive behaviors. However, symptoms and their severity vary widely across these three core areas. Taken together, they may result in relatively mild challenges for someone on the high functioning end of the autism spectrum. For others, symptoms may be more severe, as when repetitive behaviors and lack of spoken language interfere with everyday life.

It is sometimes said that if you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism.

While autism is usually a life long condition, all children and adults benefit from interventions, or therapies, that can reduce symptoms and increase skills and abilities. Although it is best to begin intervention as soon as possible, the benefits of therapy can continue throughout life. The long term outcome is highly variable. A small percentage of children lose their diagnosis over time, while others remain severely affected. Many have normal **cognitive skills**, despite challenges in social and language abilities. Many individuals with autism develop speech and learn to communicate with others. Early intervention can make extraordinary differences in your child's development. How your child is functioning now may be very different from how he or she will function later on in life.

The information following on the social symptoms, communication disorders and repetitive behaviors associated with autism is partially taken from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) website.



Social symptoms

Typically developing infants are social by nature. They gaze at faces, turn toward voices, grasp a finger and even smile by 2 to 3 months of age. By contrast, most children who develop autism have difficulty engaging in the give-and-take of everyday human interactions. By 8 to 10 months of age, many infants who go on to develop autism are showing some symptoms such as failure to respond to their names, reduced interest in people and delayed babbling. By toddlerhood, many children with autism have difficulty playing social games, don't imitate the actions of others and prefer to play alone. They may fail to seek comfort or respond to parents' displays of anger or affection in typical ways.

Research suggests that children with autism are attached to their parents. However, the way they express this attachment can be unusual. To parents, it may seem as if their child is disconnected. Both children and adults with autism also tend to have difficulty interpreting what others are thinking and feeling. Subtle social cues such as a smile, wave or grimace may convey little meaning. To a person who misses these social cues, a statement like "Come here!" may mean the same thing, regardless of whether the speaker is smiling and extending her arms for a hug

or frowning and planting her fists on her hips. Without the ability to interpret gestures and facial expressions, the social world can seem bewildering.

Many people with autism have similar difficulty seeing things from another person's perspective. Most five-year-olds understand that other people have different thoughts, feelings and goals than they have. A person with autism may lack such understanding. This, in turn, can interfere with the ability to predict or understand another person's actions.

It is common – but not universal – for those with autism to have difficulty regulating emotions. This can take the form of seemingly “immature” behavior such as crying or having outbursts in inappropriate situations. It can also lead to disruptive and physically aggressive behavior. The tendency to “lose control” may be particularly pronounced in unfamiliar, overwhelming or frustrating situations. Frustration can also result in self-injurious behaviors such as head banging, hair pulling or self-biting.

Fortunately, children with autism can be taught how to socially interact, use gestures and recognize facial expressions. Also, there are many strategies that can be used to help the child with autism deal with frustration so that he or she doesn't have to resort to challenging behaviors. We will discuss this later.

Communication difficulties

Young children with autism tend to be delayed in babbling, speaking and learning to use gestures. Some infants who later develop autism coo and babble during the first few months of life before losing these communicative behaviors. Others experience significant language delays and don't begin to speak until much later. With therapy, however, most people with autism do learn to use spoken language and all can learn to communicate.

Many nonverbal or nearly nonverbal children and adults learn to use communication systems such as pictures, sign language, electronic word processors or even speech-generating devices.

When language begins to develop, people with autism may use speech in unusual ways. Some have difficulty combining words into meaningful sentences. They may speak only single words or repeat the same phrase over and over. Some go through a stage where they repeat what they hear verbatim (echolalia).

Many parents assume difficulties expressing language automatically mean their child isn't able to understand the language of others, but this is not always the case. It is important to distinguish between expressive language and receptive language. Children with difficulties in expressive language are often unable to express what they are thinking through language, whereas children with difficulties in receptive language are often unable to understand what others are saying. Therefore, the fact that your child may seem unable to express him or herself through language does not necessarily mean he or she is unable to comprehend the language of others. Be sure to talk to your doctor or look for signs that your child is able to interpret language, as this important distinction will affect the way you communicate with him or her.

It is important to understand the importance of pragmatics when looking to improve and expand upon your child's communication skills. **Pragmatics** are social rules for using language in a meaningful context or conversation. While it is important that your child learns how to communicate through words or sentences, it is also key to emphasize both when and where the specific message should be conveyed. Challenges in pragmatics are a common feature of spoken language difficulties in children with autism. These challenges may become more apparent as your child gets older.

Some mildly affected children exhibit only slight delays in language or even develop precocious language and unusually large vocabularies – yet have difficulty sustaining a conversation. Some children and adults with autism tend to carry on monologues on a favorite subject, giving others little chance to comment. In other words, the ordinary “give-and-take” of conversation proves difficult. Some children with ASD with superior language skills tend to speak like little professors, failing to pick up on the “kid-speak” that's common among their peers.

Another common difficulty is the inability to understand body language, tone of voice and expressions that aren't meant to be taken literally. For example, even an adult with autism might interpret a sarcastic "Oh, that's just great!" as meaning it really is great.

Conversely, individuals affected by autism may not exhibit typical body language. Facial expressions, movements and gestures may not match what they are saying. Their tone of voice may fail to reflect their feelings. Some use a high-pitched sing-song or a flat, robot-like voice. This can make it difficult for others to know what they want and need. This failed communication, in turn, can lead to frustration and inappropriate behavior (such as screaming or grabbing) on the part of the person with autism. Fortunately, there are proven methods for helping children and adults with autism learn better ways to express their needs. As the person with autism learns to communicate what he or she wants, challenging behaviors often subside.

Children with autism often have difficulty letting others know what they want or need until they are taught how to communicate through speech, gestures or other means.

Repetitive behaviors

Unusual repetitive behaviors and/or a tendency to engage in a restricted range of activities are another core symptom of autism. Common repetitive behaviors include hand-flapping, rocking, jumping and twirling, arranging and rearranging objects and repeating sounds, words or phrases. Sometimes the repetitive behavior is self-stimulating, such as wiggling fingers in front of the eyes.

The tendency to engage in a restricted range of activities can be seen in the way that many children with autism play with toys. Some spend hours lining up toys in a specific way instead of using them for pretend play. Similarly, some adults are preoccupied with having household or other objects in a fixed order or place. It can prove extremely upsetting if

someone or something disrupts the order. Along these lines, many children and adults with autism need and demand extreme consistency in their environment and daily routine. Slight changes can be extremely stressful and lead to outbursts.

Repetitive behaviors can take the form of intense preoccupations or obsessions. These extreme interests can prove all the more unusual for their content (e.g. fans, vacuum cleaners or toilets) or depth of knowledge (e.g. knowing and repeating astonishingly detailed information about Thomas the Tank Engine or astronomy). Older children and adults with autism may develop tremendous interest in numbers, symbols, dates or science topics.

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