

# Autism



Autism, or Autistic Disorder, as it is defined in the DSM-IV, is characterized by very severe abnormally-impaired development in social-interactive and communication skills. Children with Autistic Disorder display a highly-restricted repertoire of activities and interests. Their behavior is often considered to be strange and unusual. They are impaired in their reciprocal social-interactive skills, often having difficulty making eye contact. They may display odd and atypical body postures and gestures; characteristics such as hand slapping, body rocking, and other abnormal postures are often noted.

Youngsters with autism often display a lack of interest in other people. They may become preoccupied with parts of objects or possess very narrow areas of interest.

Odd and unusual behaviors are noted, such as repetitive mimicking or an insistence that things be the same/consistent. Many youngsters with autism can become extremely upset when something, such as a routine or even the placement of furnishings in a room, has changed.

The majority of people who are accurately diagnosed with Autistic Disorder are likely to also be mentally retarded. There is some controversy about this issue, but it appears that individuals with Autistic Disorder score very low on measures of verbal intelligence. While there is the rare autistic individual who is a "savant" and displays certain extraordinary mental abilities, such as the capacity to quickly add multiple 10-digit numbers, this is extremely rare and often not very helpful in the individual's daily life.

Proposed changes to the diagnostic system, which will be realized in the DSM-V, to be published in 2013, may clarify our understanding of autism. In our current diagnostic system, autism is a very severe disability and is likely to cause great impairment in social, educational, and occupational functioning. The prognosis for individuals with severe autism is poor. However, there are many individuals who display signs of autism but are more appropriately diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder or Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). These individuals are likely to benefit greatly from treatment and to be able to function competently, if not completely successfully, as independent adults.

## Recommendations:

1. If you suspect that your child is displaying symptoms of autism, then seek evaluation and treatment for your child at an early age. Early intervention for youngsters with autism is proving to be extremely successful and is strongly related to their future success.

2. Find an expert in autism to work with you in establishing your child's educational program. You are strongly encouraged to get your child involved by the age of 3 in a full-day educational program at your local public school. Work closely with experts in your local school system to ensure that your child receives the appropriate social and academic education.
3. Find a therapist who can work with your family to help you adjust to the demands of a child with autism. It is important that you locate a therapist with an expertise in this area who can serve as a consultant to your local school system.
4. Many youngsters with autism experience significant sensory issues. It is important to consult an occupational therapist who has an understanding of Sensory Integration Disorder.
5. Work on communication skills with your autistic child. Work on simple strategies, such as making eye contact and learning how to identify nonverbal cues, and provide direct training in reflective listening.
6. Teach and model skills. Children with autism often struggle to pick up basic behaviors, such as manners, sharing, and self-control, that are learned through life experience. Parents and teachers must make a direct, concerted and repeated effort to train children in these and many other skills.
7. Nurture your child's interests that are more broadly shared by others. For example, encourage your child's interest in learning about baseball, dinosaurs, or cars rather than about train schedules or clocks.
8. Educate yourself about autism. Look over the websites and read the books that are listed in this handout.

**Websites:**

<http://www.autismspeaks.org/whatisit/index.php>

(An in-depth look at the diagnosis of autism, including treatments and information for families on how to deal with the diagnosis.)

<http://www.childbrain.com/pdd.shtml>

(Extensive information on autistic diagnosis, DSM-IV criteria, assessment and testing.)

[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/autism\\_spectrum.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/autism_spectrum.htm)

(Information for parents on signs, symptoms, and treatments of autism spectrum disorders.)

[http://kidshealth.org/parent/medical/learning/pervasive\\_develop\\_disorders.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/medical/learning/pervasive_develop_disorders.html)

(Information for parents on signs, causes, and treatments of autistic spectrum disorders, including tips on how to best help your child.)

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/asd.cfm>

(Basic information on autism spectrum disorders, including symptoms and treatments.)

**Books:**

Delfos, Martine. 2005. *A Strange World--Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS: A Guide For Parents, Partners, Professional Carers, and People With ASDs*. Jessica Kingsley: Philadelphia, PA.  
(Using current research, this book discusses the differences between autism spectrum disorders as they are encountered in children, adults, and adolescents, as well as in men and women.)

Dowty, Terri and Kitty Cowlshaw. 2002. *Home-Educating Our Autistic Spectrum Children: Paths are Made by Walking*. Jessica Kingsley: Philadelphia, PA.  
(Provides information on the benefits of home-schooling children with autistic spectrum disorders.)

Goldstein, Sam, Jack Naglieri, and Sally Ozonoff. 2008. *Assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Guilford Press: New York, NY.  
(An assessment of autism spectrum disorders that unites current methods with assessment framework. Geared toward teachers and psychological professionals.)

Siegel, Bryna. 1998. *The World of the Autistic Child: Understanding and Treating Autistic Spectrum Disorders*. Oxford University Press: New York, NY.  
(Provides help for parents and caregivers of children diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders on what the diagnosis means, what to do next, and available treatments.)