
Autism

What is Autism?

Autism is a rare and severe developmental disorder which is present from very early in life. Children with autism have problems in social understanding and communication. They are isolated from their environment because they cannot understand it. To them our world is a chaotic and frightening place. They tend to retreat into themselves. They appear remote to the people they live with and they fail to develop normal human relationships.

Autism appears in varying degrees; from mild cases where the person with autism may eventually be able to live an independent, almost normal life to those severe cases who will need life-long care.

Most autistic children are intellectually disabled and at times, but certainly not always, the condition may co-exist with other problems such as epilepsy, cerebral palsy, fragile-x syndrome or tuberous sclerosis.

What causes it?

The cause of autism is still unknown. However, at present the current thinking of researchers is that autism is caused by biological and genetic factors, rather than because of the way a child is brought up.

Who does it affect?

Autism affects about one child in every 1000 and approximately four males for every female. One child in every 300 has Asperger syndrome, a milder form of autism which produces social awkwardness but may allow a child to function in school and perhaps later become employed.

Autism usually appears before a child is 30 months old and behavioural problems are at their worst in the preschool years. They tend to improve during the school years, although adolescence is often an extremely trying time, with about 30% of adolescents with autism developing epilepsy and/or becoming depressed, moody or lethargic.

Behavioural signs and symptoms

The child with autism does not necessarily require all the symptoms below to be diagnosed:

- difficulty in mixing with other children
- acts as if deaf, visually impaired, or blind
- no eye contact
- unusual body language
- no fear of real dangers
- resists change in routine
- resists learning
- lacks use of gesture, laughing and giggling
- not cuddly
- unusual crying
- marked physical overactivity
- inappropriate attachments to objects
- spin objects
- sustained odd play
- feeding problems
- poor sleeping patterns
- stand-offish manner

How it affects individuals

Social effects

Social interest and interaction in children with autism is impaired. They may appear aloof, apathetic or unresponsive. They appear to live in their own world and often insist on being left alone. They appear to be more interested in objects than people and may respond inappropriately or take emotional responses to extremes.

Although not usually deaf or blind autistic children often make no eye contact, looking at people as if they were not there. Development of speech may be delayed with some children never learning how to speak. Words may be used inappropriately, or they may use such gestures as pointing, instead of speech, often indicating needs by using an adult's hand.

While children with autism have no fear of such real dangers as road traffic, they have an unreasonable fear of such harmless things as a whistling toy train.

While autistic children do not usually like being cuddled they may even seem to be repulsed by physical contact and will fail to seek comfort when distressed. They may appear not to feel pain, e.g. not crying after a heavy fall, yet a child with autism can

also be vulnerable and easily upset. They may go through times of constant crying or conversely, times of unusual absence of crying.

Sometimes, because the child seems to show contempt for those who love him/her by perhaps treating them as objects rather than a source of comfort, parents feel hurt and inadequate.

Behavioural effects

Autistic children have difficulty in the development of play and imagination and often have obsessive interest in certain toys or mechanical appliances, particularly things with parts that have repetitive movements or spin e.g. wheels.

They can have strange, obsessive and ritualistic behaviour accompanied by marked physical overactivity such as flicking fingers, flapping hands, standing on tips of toes or rocking the whole body. They will rarely stand still, and may laugh or giggle for no apparent reason. They may have severe tantrums. These may last for hours and can include head banging, screaming or punching holes in the walls.

They appear normal but their behaviour is often anything but normal and it can be very embarrassing to be with them in public.

When their routine is altered, even if the change is very small, they often become upset. Autistic children resist learning new skills or activities and therefore can have continued problems with such things as toilet training.

Autistic children may have feeding problems, such as poor sucking. They may have odd and restrictive diets e.g. tomato sauce and crackers.

Later in Life

As autistic children grow up, much of the distressing behaviour of the early years grows less. They may show some interest in social contact for example. However, they may still resist change and have difficulty in relating to others. They may learn to speak more naturally, or adversely, may need speech

therapy. Abilities vary widely from child to child.

Adolescence is another difficult period where behaviour again becomes exaggerated. This eventually improves as the person becomes adult. Autism becomes more obvious in adolescence with abnormalities in facial and body movements more apparent. Adolescents with milder forms of autism often suffer from severe depression.

On the positive side children with autism often excel in certain areas involving patterns e.g. doing jigsaws and drawing. Many also enjoy listening to music.

Children with autism have a good long-term memory and things learnt are not easily forgotten.

Practical Suggestions for Coping with Autism

There is no cure for autism. Only 20-25% of people with autism are able to live independently. Most require continual care in a structured, predictable environment. Autism is very difficult to treat. The most effective treatments use a combination of special education, behavioural therapy, and medication.

Special education: Autistic children require special education to help them learn successfully. The success will depend on the capabilities of the child, but most children can benefit. Many autistic children function at a subnormal intellectual level, others are intellectually bright and perform well in school subjects, but have severe social adjustment problems. Not all children with autism are severely incapacitated, though most children with autism cannot cope with a normal environment without a great deal of adult help and supervision on a long-term basis.

Behavioural therapy: This approach is helpful in reducing undesirable behaviour and enhancing development of skills. It requires commitment and a great deal of work from carers, but can make life better for everyone in the household. Carers can often work closely with therapists to develop specific therapies for their child.

Environment: Keep the environment as unchanged as possible. Autistic children resist change of any kind.

Routines: Autistic children prefer consistent, predictable and very organized routines. It enables them to cope more easily.

Don't blame yourself: There is no evidence that parenting is in anyway a cause of autism. It is a neurological disorder and no one knows what causes it.

Where to go for Support

The Autistic Association

The Autistic Association offers support groups for parents of children and adults with autism and Asperger Syndrome. The Canterbury branch provides holiday programme for school children, music therapy, home support and newsletters.

While the national office of the Autistic Association is in Christchurch it's activities are separate from those of the Canterbury Branch. They provide publications, videos and audio tapes for hire or sale, a quarterly newsletter, a free parent pack, conferences, seminars and workshops.

For more information contact the Canterbury branch
03 381 1057

Caring for Carers

Joining a carer support group can relieve some of the stress you are under as a carer. The constant tasks, the concerns, grief, drama, moments of joy, frustration and exhaustion are all part of the day to day existence of a carer.

As a carer, it is important to remember that you are an individual with needs of your own. Ensure that you take care of yourself by arranging your day so that you have some time for yourself. Meeting with other carers can also ease the loneliness that carers can often experience.

Caring for Carers has a Newsletter and several support meetings each month and ongoing telephone support. These services are provided to help make your job easier.

Caring for Carers is situated:

4th floor, Securities House
221 Gloucester Street, Christchurch.
Postal address: P O Box 13 167, Christchurch
Phone: 377 8426
Fax: 377 8420
Email: caringforcarers@xtra.co.nz