



providing support for those affected by  
autism and aspergers syndrome

## What is Autism?

It is said that as many as one in every 250 people display autistic tendencies.

Autism affects the way that a person communicates and relates to other people. It crosses all intellectual abilities, nationalities and cultures, but is more common in boys than girls. Early diagnosis is difficult because people with autism can display a wide range of characteristics in varying degrees. People with autism look just like anybody else without the disability. The invisible nature of the disability makes it far harder to recognise and to create an understanding of the condition.

People with autism often have difficulty with language and communication and with forming social relationships. They find it difficult to play or use their imagination and their motor and co-ordination skills may be affected. Other features include challenging or repetitive behaviour and resisting any change to their routine. Autism cannot be cured, but people diagnosed with it can achieve a better quality of life with the right support, treatment and education.

Early diagnosis can show parents the way to work with their child to overcome some of these affects and to help decide the most appropriate form of schooling for them.

## The Autistic Spectrum

As autism is defined as a collection of observable features affecting people within a wide range of intellectual abilities a diagnosis will often say a person is within the autistic spectrum of disorders.

Other terms used to describe people within the Autistic Spectrum are :-

- Semantic pragmatic disorder
- Pervasive developmental disorder
- Autistic traits, tendencies or features
- The autistic continuum
- Specific language impairments
- Severe communication/behaviour difficulties
- Global or complex learning/language disorder
- Oppositional defiance disorder

## What Causes Autism?

Current research has identified various possible causes of autism – brain dysfunction, genetic factors and allergic reactions. There does not seem to be one clear cause that affects all the people diagnosed with autism – the research continues. Poor parenting does NOT cause autism. The diagnosis of autism is made by observation from a qualified consultant (contact us if you need further information on this or refer to our Diagnosis factsheet).

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### Living with Autism

Autism affects every single member of the household. Simple everyday activities, such as going shopping or inviting friends to stay, suddenly become a logistical nightmare.

The person with autism becomes the centre of attention and this increases tension in the family, especially among siblings.

Early diagnosis can be difficult and confusion with other language and learning disorders, such as attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and dyspraxia is common.

There are also issues around finding suitable educational and support services and residential and respite care. Parents also worry about how they will cope when they get older or if they become ill themselves.

### Observable Features of Autism and Behaviour you can see in the Autistic Person

The three main features of autism are known as the Triad of Impairment :-

1. A person on the autistic spectrum will have difficulty with Social Interaction.
2. (Relationships). They may appear aloof or indifferent to people around them.
3. They are likely to have difficulty in Social Communication. They may not speak or understand what is said to them.

They may not understand facial expressions or even gesture or tone of voice in the way intended by another person and take things literally.

They may have no acceptable ways of letting other people know what they want or what is the matter with them.

They are unlikely to play imaginative games with other children and have a rigid way of thinking using toys without imagination preferring always to handle them in obsessive/repetitive ways.

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These features form the basis of all other observable difficulties for the person with an autistic spectrum disorder and result in a general resistance to changes (in the environment, places, routines or people).

- **Playing alone** in their space with one familiar toy or piece of equipment. May play alongside other children but not with them. Will only join in play with other children if the adult insists and assists.
- **Lack the ability for creative play** – with toy cars or dolls or any symbolic toys – lining them all up regardless of possible use.
- **Displaying indifference** to incidents, activities and sounds close by – often seemingly unaware of new people entering the room or the TV that everyone else is watching.
- **Using other people to meet their needs** –e.g. Takes an adult's wrist to put their hand on the door they wish to be opened – point the hand towards the biscuit tin that is out of reach.
- **Laughing, crying, or giggling inappropriately** for no reason that others can see. They may be thinking back to a funny or sad incident totally unconnected with the here and now but cannot tell us that is why they are laughing/crying, or what the memory is.
- **Making no eye contact** when talking or even when signing. With teaching, they may respond by sign to hello but perhaps under the table – not in sight of the person they are responding to.
- **Talking incessantly about one subject** – maybe washing machines or trains, saying everything they know or want to know and demanding answers but taking no notice of what others may want to talk about – continuously bringing the topic back to the one of their choosing.
- **Making a one-sided interaction** – saying what they want to say – using the other person as a sounding board, not responding to what is said to them at all. This can happen with children playing – 'everyone has to play my game – I don't even see that what you are doing is playing'.
- **Spinning objects** – very skilful spinning of balls, hoops, string, wheels almost any object.

### What to Expect

Autism affects a person for the whole of their life, in all aspects of living, the way they communicate and make relationships. The sooner an accurate diagnosis is made then the sooner appropriate help, information and support can be found for the autistic person and their family.

With an early intervention program, the autistic child can be helped to better understand the world around them and learn appropriate means of interacting with people. Careful early diagnosis and intervention can help parents to understand why their child does what he does and provide information on approaches to use with their child.

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With more information, parents are then able to make informed choices for the most appropriate form of education for their child, which can continue their progression towards a more independent and fulfilling adult life.

As people diagnosed within the autistic spectrum will also come within the full range of intellectual abilities, any future plans will need to be made individually as, like all of us, autistic people are all very different and progress at different rates with different abilities, likes and dislikes.

### **Challenging Behaviour**

When we meet someone new who does not speak our language or is from a different cultural background and reacts to situations in ways we do not expect, we are presented with a challenge. We have to find out how to communicate with them, how to help them understand what is going on, what we want of them and how to find out what they want of us. It can be the same with an autistic person.

Sometimes the autistic person's anxiety and frustration can lead to extremely challenging and acting-out behaviour such as tantrums (at any age), screaming, throwing things and hitting out at those nearby (usually the most loved and familiar person – their parents/carers). At these times a person experienced in working with autistic children/adults will be needed to provide practical help and advise to those close to or living with the autistic person.

The experienced worker will be able to help them to clearly observe and analyse the problem behaviours and develop tactics to lessen them. They will be able to help calm the whole situation by changing the surroundings/their reactions and responses to the behaviour aiding the communication with the autistic person and giving the autistic person a more socially acceptable means of expressing their need.

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