

Autism

Children with the developmental disorder autism have difficulty communicating and interacting with others. They may insist on certain rituals or repeated behaviors and get upset when their routines are disrupted. The cause of autism is unknown, and it is not related to anything the parents have done wrong. Although autism is a difficult behavioral disorder, in recent years there have been great gains in its treatment.

What is autism?

Doctors still have many questions about autism. It is a “pervasive developmental disorder,” which simply means that it affects your child’s development in many different ways. Children with autism have a hard time communicating and interacting with others. They follow repeated behaviors or rituals and withdraw from normal interactions with other people. Autistic children also may be developmentally delayed (slow). However, because of their communication problems, it is hard to measure their intelligence accurately.

Finding out that a child has autism is a very difficult event for your family. Autistic children need a lot of care and attention. Current treatments can really improve the educational and social functioning of children with autism, especially if they are started early.

What does it look like?

Every child with autism is different—some are more severely affected than others. Parents usually suspect a problem with their child’s behavior around the first year. You may notice symptoms such as:

- *Slow language and social development.* Your child may seem withdrawn, “off in his own world.” Your child may not make eye contact nor pay attention when you call his or her name. At first you may think there’s a hearing problem. In addition, your child may not meet expected stages of development; for example, not pointing to things or not showing the usual baby talk or babbling by age 1. (Children with a related, less-severe disorder called Asperger’s syndrome don’t have such severe language disorders.)
- *Ritualistic behaviors.* Your child may follow odd behavior routines, such as rocking back and forth. Rather than playing pretend games with toys, he or she may insist on lining them up in a certain way. Autistic children may insist on having consistent rituals and get upset if there is any change in their routine. (Most children also like having consistent rituals and routines but not to the same extent as autistic children.)

- *Intelligence problems.* Some children with autism seem slow, but it is difficult to assess their true intelligence. Social and communication problems may make it impossible for autistic children to learn in a regular classroom. In educational and social situations, they may focus in on small details while missing “the big picture.” Although it is true that some autistic children have one isolated, remarkable talent, this is uncommon.

What causes autism?

- The cause of autism is unknown. Possible contributors include genetic factors or some type of brain injury.
- Autism is *not* caused by bad parenting or by a reaction to childhood vaccines.

What are some possible complications of autism?

Children with autism need special education and training programs to maximize their behavioral, social, and intellectual abilities. Delays in diagnosis and treatment may lead to worse outcomes.

What puts your child at risk of autism?

- Boys are affected three or four times more often than girls.
- Autism is more common in children with other neurologic disorders, especially those with seizures. Some rare genetic disorders (fragile X syndrome and tuberous sclerosis) are common in autistic children.

Can autism be prevented?

There is no way to prevent autism.

How is autism treated?

Getting diagnosis and proper treatment for autism is a detailed process. Intensive therapy, beginning as early as possible, can improve your child’s language capacity and social functioning. Expert evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other specialist is needed.

- *Special education approaches* are needed, even if your child’s intelligence and language skills are near normal. Most experts feel that children with autism do best in a structured program specially geared to the needs of children with this disorder.
- Educational interventions should begin as soon as your child’s autism is diagnosed, preferably before age 3. At first, the emphasis is on efforts to enhance your child’s behavior and communication skills.

- As your child grows, his or her school should provide individualized special education programs. The focus should be on learning social and communication skills. Your child will receive help with educational areas in which he or she is delayed, along with encouragement to pursue areas of strength.
- Older children receive practical help with skills they will need to live as independently as possible.
- *Other treatments* may be helpful, depending on your child's situation:
 - *Psychotherapy* is particularly helpful for autistic children and teens with higher intelligence but poor social skills.
 - *Medication* may help reduce depression, problems with poor attention or hyperactivity, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and other psychiatric symptoms.
 - *Social skills training* appears helpful for older children with autism or Asperger's syndrome.
 - *Unproven therapies*. A number of treatments claim to bring improvement in autism. Some of these, such as specific types of nutritional or vitamin therapy, have not yet been proved beneficial by scientific research. Other approaches, such as facilitated communication, have not been shown to be effective.

It's a good idea to be skeptical of claims about autism treatments. At the very least, what works for one child may not be the best treatment for your child. Intensive research into the causes and treatment of autism is continuing.

- *What is my child's prognosis?* No one can predict your child's final social, educational, and occupational outcomes. Some children with autism grow up to live self-sufficient lives, especially if their speech skills are relatively good. Prompt diagnosis, early treatment, and regular follow-up will help to maximize your child's functioning.

When should I call your office?

- All children with autism should receive regular follow-up evaluation and treatment from mental health and educational specialists. Our office will continue to coordinate your child's medical care.
- Call our office if you have questions about your child's disorder or need help in accessing community resources.

Where can I get more information?

A good place to start is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Autism Information Center: www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/autism.htm.