

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Autism now affects one in 160 children in Australia, according to the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders. A diagnosis such as this can strike fear in the heart of any parent, as there is no known cure, yet it can be mixed with a sense of relief that their suspicions about their child's behaviour have been confirmed. Effective early intervention can significantly improve a child's outcomes.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a complex neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate and relate to other people and the world around them. It's usually apparent by the age of three.

Some children will have obvious autistic behaviours, such as flapping their hands, no speech at all and be seemingly unaware of those around them. Others will have subtle symptoms, such as severely limited interests and social problems, so may not be diagnosed until they're older. Some children who have associated difficulties may be diagnosed as having autistic tendencies (or traits).

There are several different diagnoses that come under the autism spectrum disorders (ASD) umbrella: autistic disorder (also known as classical autism); Asperger's syndrome; Rett's disorder and childhood disintegrative disorder may have similar symptoms and are sometimes included as an ASD.

All of these conditions share some common areas of concern, namely limited social skills, communication difficulties and restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours. Sometimes, the child may also have an intellectual impairment, but this isn't always the case. Many children with autism are also sensitive to sensory stimuli, such as touch, sound or temperature.

Autism occurs in all racial, ethnic and social groups, and is four times more likely to strike boys than girls.

SYMPTOMS

Autism impairs a person's ability to communicate with and relate to others. It can also be associated with rigid routines and repetitive behaviours, such as obsessively arranging objects or following very specific routines.

The three core symptoms associated with autism include:

- Impaired social interaction
- Flawed communication
- Repetitive behaviour.





Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviour in their child, or their child's failure to reach age-appropriate developmental milestones. Some parents describe a child who seemed "different" from birth, while others describe one who was developing normally, then lost certain skills.

If they feel there's a problem, parents need to ensure they have their child assessed because experience shows that early detection and intervention will maximise a child's potential.

The newly published *Australian Autism Handbook*, by Benison O'Reilly and Seana Smith (Macmillan, rrp \$35), describes some early signs that can be cause for concern in toddlers:

- Lack of babbling or pointing by 12 months
- No shared interest in objects or activities with another person
- No single words by 16 months, or no two-word phrases by 24 months
- Flat facial expression and vocal tone
- Repetition of heard words or phrases
- Lack of eye contact

On their own, these signs may not indicate autism, but they should be sufficient to see your doctor about a referral for a developmental assessment immediately.

Following the initial assessment, the child's development can be monitored and, if necessary, early intervention commenced. In general, most diagnoses are made between the ages of two and three. Visit www.firstsigns.org for more information.

Autism cannot be detected by a blood or urine test. Rather, several screening

checklists are used which rely on parent interviews and direct observations of the child. The checklists take into account such things as imitation and pretend play, speech, sensory difficulties, repetitive behaviours, restricted interests and so on.

Sometimes, a child with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism may not be diagnosed until they're much older. This is because they have a normal to high IQ and develop language normally. Although their symptoms are much more subtle, these children still experience enormous difficulties with social interaction, as they are unable to read social cues and body language, and can talk incessantly on a limited range of subjects, or speak like a "little professor". The problems they have fitting in can meet with little understanding, which causes them anxiety and stress.

DIAGNOSIS

If you have concerns about your child's behavioural development, your first stop should be your GP. If he or she shares your concern, you can get a referral to a developmental paediatrician, who can arrange a series of tests or refer you to a multi-disciplinary assessment centre.

Once you have an accurate diagnosis, you will know what's behind the concerning behaviours and be able to target early interventions accordingly. There can be long waiting lists for some assessment centres, so if you or your doctor suspect an autism spectrum disorder, don't delay starting treatment.

TREATMENT

The first thing parents need to do when confronted with a diagnosis of autism is to get as much information as possible about the condition, interventions and available resources. The *Australian Autism Handbook* is helpful, as is the website www.autismawareness.com.au.

While there is no known "cure" as such, there is a considerable and growing body of evidence that shows significant improvement in the functioning of autistic children who receive effective early treatment.

Some well-established intervention models have a lot of evidence behind them, but others have less independent research to back them up. Parents will need to read up on which treatments are best supported by research. Speech pathology and occupational therapy, and special education techniques may feature as part of the intervention program.

The intervention program needs to be intensive – between 20 and 40 hours per week is necessary for young children to make major gains. Unfortunately, a good intensive intervention program can be expensive, as they're provided by private agencies, but there are non-intensive government-funded programs available.

When a child receives a diagnosis of autism, parents need to get busy and stay positive. With quality early intervention, children can make considerable gains. Older children, too, can still make gains that will make a significant difference to their lives and those of their families. >>>