

Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is a condition of the brain that affects a person's ability to communicate, develop relationships, or respond to their environment like a typical person would. It affects each person differently and is as individual as we are all *unique*. However, each person with ASD has in common certain social, communication, movement, and sensory challenges that affect how they develop. Because it is a spectrum disorder, this means their learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities can range from gifted to extremely challenged depending on the child. Scientists don't know all of the causes of ASD, but through the study of twins and families with autism, they do believe it is caused by a genetic condition most of the time.

There are two important things to understand about autism. First, you cannot know your child has autism until you receive testing and a diagnosis. Second, if your child is diagnosed, they don't have something wrong with them. Every child struggles with something in life, and as parents, we help them work through it. We also help them discover how to use the strengths they were born with. A child with ASD is no different. As you learn the way your child responds to their world, you adjust to their needs and equip them to express feelings and make connections with others in the way they can. An ASD child isn't damaged or *broken*, they just see things differently and that difference brings some variety, fun, and some challenges, into your family.

Signs of ASD

Developmentally, a child:

- Might not respond to their name by 12 months of age.
- Might not point to objects that interest them by 14 months.
- Might not play "pretend" games, such as feeding a doll, by 18 months.
- Might not have appropriate facial expressions.
- Might have delayed speech and language skills.

A Child with ASD might:

- Avoid eye contact or want to be alone.
- Have trouble relating or responding appropriately to other people's feelings or be unable to talk about their own.
- Not respond to a parent's smile or other facial expressions.
- Give unrelated answers to questions.
- Have unusual reactions and sensitivities to sounds, smells, textures, tastes, or lights.

You might notice repetitive and obsessive behaviors in your child such as:

- Repeating words or phrases over and over.
- A strong need for routines, order, and rituals and gets upset by changes to them.

- An obsession with a few interests or unusual activities and doing them repeatedly all day.
- Repeated hand flapping, swaying, twirling fingers, rocking, or spinning in circles.
- Or unusual use of vision or gaze, like looking at toys from unusual angles.

Getting Screened

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children between the ages of 18 to 24 months be screened for autism. They do this by having you fill out a Modified Checklist for Autism. You answer questions based on your observations of your child's behavior. If your child appears to be at risk for autism, then your provider will refer you to an Early Intervention program in your state where they will do a full assessment or evaluation.

Relating to an Autistic Child

- Speak directly and literally to your child.
- Because verbal communication may be hard, become a detective of their body language and behavior.
- Look for ways to focus on your child's *strengths* and interests rather than fixate on their short-falls.
- Remember that your child's world may be too loud, too overstimulating, too bright, and sometimes too frightening.
- Help your child to form friendships.
- Love your child unconditionally. Don't live in thoughts of, "what-ifs", "if-onlys", or "why can't you?" Your child needs your patience and *understanding*. Live in the present, learn all you can about your child's unique strengths, and accept them for who they are.

With your love and help and the help of people who specialize in working with children with autism, your child can grow up to have friendships, love, and purpose. And this is something we all want for our children.

Resources include:

1. Zablotzky B, Black LI, Maenner MJ, Schieve LA, Blumberg SJ. Estimated prevalence of autism and other developmental disabilities following questionnaire changes in the 2014 National Health Interview Survey. 2015.
2. Child Development Institute. Autism and Autistic Disorders. Found at <https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/child-psychology/autism-aspergers/#.XNxXGaZIAUP>, accessed 8/19/2019.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Autism Spectrum Disorder. Found at <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>, accessed 8/19/2019.
4. Autism Speaks. Autism Facts and Figures. Found at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-facts-and-figures>, accessed 8/19/2019.
5. American Academy of Pediatricians. What are the Early Signs of Autism? Found at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Autism/Pages/Early-Signs-of-Autism-Spectrum-Disorders.aspx>, accessed 8/19/2019.
6. Williams, Glenda, MD. Pediatrician. Interview.
7. American Academy of Pediatricians. How Pediatricians Screen for Autism. Found at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Autism/Pages/How-Doctors-Screen-for-Autism.aspx>, accessed 8/19/2019.
8. American Academy of Pediatricians. If Autism is Suspected, What's Next? Found at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Autism/Pages/If-Autism-is-Suspected-Whats-Next.aspx>, accessed 8/19/2019.
9. Autism Speaks. 11 Myths About Autism. Found at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/blog/11-myths-about-autism>, accessed 8/19/2019.
10. The Behavior Exchange. Dispelling Myths About the Causes of Autism. Found at <https://www.behaviorexchange.com/blog/2017/09/dispelling-myths-about-the-causes-of-autism/>, accessed 8/19/2019.
11. Taylor LE, Swerdfeger AL, Eslick GD. Vaccines are not associated with autism: an evidence-based meta-analysis of case-control and cohort studies. *Vaccine*. 2014 Jun 17;32(29):3623-9.
12. McDonald ME, Reed FD. Distinguishing Science and Pseudoscience in the Assessment and Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorder*. 2018 Feb 12:415.
13. Notbohm E. Ten things every child with autism wishes you knew. *Future Horizons*; 2005.