

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*
Autistic Syndrome
Information for Teachers and School Staff

Definition

Autism is a developmental disorder that usually appears during the first years of childhood (18 to 60 months). Although there is no known cause for autism, researchers believe that it is a neurological disorder brought on by genetic and biological factors.

The diagnostic criteria for autism fall into three categories: (1) impairment in social interaction, (2) qualitative difficulties with communication, and (3) repetitive, restricted, or stereotyped behaviors. In order to receive a diagnosis for autism, a child must meet requirements in each of the three categories.

Children with autism have difficulty communicating and interacting with others (no eye contact, limited or no language, low motivation for typical play). They often display repetitive behaviors that reflect their desire for extreme order. For instance, a child with autism may not want to go the bathroom until they first have their favorite book. Without the book, they refuse to use the bathroom. Children with autism have different sensitivities to the physical world. One child with autism may not hear high pitches; another may cry and moan when a siren goes by because it physically hurts them.

Unlike children with mental retardation, children with autism do not necessarily have low levels of intelligence. Some children with autism have a *splinter skill*, an ability to do something very well (e.g., remembering names and dates).

Unlike children with Asperger Syndrome, children with autism display significant delays in language, cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills.

Asperger's Syndrome is one of five Pervasive Development Disorders (PDDs), a category of neurologically-based disorders that have a range of delays in different developmental stages.

Children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty with social interactions and understanding unspoken social cues (facial expressions and body language). Children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome are often highly intelligent and highly verbal and many individuals (although not all), exhibit exceptional skill or talent in a specific area. They often have obsessive routines and may be preoccupied with a particular subject of interest.

Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome are often viewed as eccentric or odd and can easily become victims of teasing and bullying.

Why do we care?

When compared to their developmental peers, students with autism have:

- Greater difficulty developing relationships other children.
- Greater difficulty letting others know what they need.
- Lower levels of academic performance.
- Greater difficulty doing simple, age-appropriate tasks.
- Greater difficulty altering their daily routines.

What can we do about it?

- Reach out to parents by directing them to support groups or family advocates.
- Provide parents and school staff with information about autism and how it relates to autism spectrum disorders.
- Maintain a working list of available resources for children with developmental disabilities.
- Serve as a liaison for parents and special education specialists. Learn about the available sources of funding for in-home treatment and school-based services.
- Work with parents to develop a behavior intervention plan for the student.
- Ask school clinicians to present on classroom management strategies for working with students diagnosed with autism.

Helpful Forms and Handouts

- AACAP Facts for Families:
 - The Child with Autism: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/AUTISTIC.HTM>.
 - Asperger's: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/69.htm>
 - Service in Schools for Children with Special Needs: <http://aacap.org/page.wv?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=Services%20In%20School%20For%20Children%20With%20Special%20Needs:%20What%20Parents%20Need%20To%20Know>
- Questions from Parents (AACPS): <http://www.aacps.org/aacps/sssd/aut.pdf>.
- Center for Autism and Related Disorders: <http://www.centerforautism.com/>.
 - What is Applied Behavior Analysis? <http://www.centerforautism.com/aba/whatisaba.asp>.
 - Evaluating ABA Programs: <http://www.centerforautism.com/aba/evaluating.asp>.
- Children with Special Needs:
 - Free Educational Materials: <http://www.childrenwithspecialneeds.com/downloads.html>.
 - Engineering the Classroom: http://speech.jpss.k12.la.us/engineering_the_classroom.htm.
 - Language & Communication Resources: <http://www.widgit.com/resources/index.htm>.
 - Sample IEP goals: <http://www.untangleautism.org/iepgoals.htm>.
- Maryland State Department of Education Special Education Overview: <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/divisions/earlyinterv/>.
 - Maryland Infant and Toddlers Program: http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/divisions/earlyinterv/infant_toddlers/message.htm.
- National Autistic Society: <http://www.nas.org.uk/>.
- Suggestions for Teachers: <http://www.center4familydevelop.com/asperger.htm>
- Kyle's Treehouse: Information on treatment, resources, events, and supports. <http://www.kylestreehouse.org>.