

# Maryland School Mental Health Alliance\*

## *Autistic Disorder*

### *Information for Parents and Caregivers*

#### **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) trouble communicating, and (3) odd 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. For example, 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, children with autism have:*

- Greater difficulty developing relationships with 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?

- Ask your child's pediatrician for information about autism.
- Contact your department of education and ask to speak to someone in special education. Learn about the available sources of funding for in-home treatment and school-based services.
- Read everything you can about protecting your child's right to a free and public education (FAPE). Seek out a parent advocate at the school your child would likely attend.
- Review the basic treatment approaches for children with autism. You can learn more by asking your school psychologists or social worker about parents support groups for parents of children with autism spectrum disorders.
- Contact a local public university to see if they have any qualified students who want to work with a child with autism. Begin by calling the departments of psychology and education.
- Home-Based Treatments used for Autism:
  - *Applied Behavioral Analysis* – uses general principles of behavioral therapy to build the skills that children with autism lack, such as language, play, self-help, social, academic, and attentional skills.
  - *Social Stories* – to be used in conjunction with another treatment; designed to help children with autism learn about particular social situations through story format.
  - *Pivotal Response Model*- a naturalistic behavioral intervention aimed at change in certain pivotal areas (e.g., responsiveness to multiple cues, motivation, self-management, and self-initiations). Curriculum goals are targeted in communication, self-help, academic, social and recreational skills, both at home and at school.
  - *Individualized Support Program* – a parent training model to help families gain the knowledge and skills needed to solve problems, advocate for their child and guide interventions.

## Helpful Forms and Handouts

- AACAP Facts for Families:
  - The Child with Autism: [http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts\\_for\\_families/the\\_child\\_with\\_autism](http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/the_child_with_autism)
  - 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](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>.

- Guidelines for choosing an ABA provider:  
[http://www.php.com/sigsupplements/feat/Provider\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.php.com/sigsupplements/feat/Provider_Guidelines.pdf).

### **Additional Resources**

- Autism Society of America  
<http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer>
- Kyle's Treehouse: Information on treatment, resources, events, and supports.  
<http://www.kylestreehouse.org>.
- 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/mess\\_age.htm](http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/divisions/earlyinterv/infant_toddlers/mess_age.htm).
- Myles, B.S. (September, 2005). *Thinking outside the box about social supports*. Retrieved January 13, 2006 from Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network website  
<http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/files/Autism/Asperger-pt2-010606.pdf>.

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