

Autism:

Frequently Asked Questions

(Excerpts from www.autismconnecticut.org)

What is autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction, communication skills and behavior. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. Autism is a spectrum disorder and it affects each individual differently and at varying degrees. Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child or their child's failure to reach appropriate developmental milestones. Some parents describe a child that seemed different from birth, while others describe a child who was developing normally and then lost skills. If you have concerns about your child's development, don't wait: speak to your pediatrician about getting your child screened for autism.

What does it mean to be “on the spectrum”?

“On the Spectrum” is usually a way of referring to the fact that a person has been given a diagnosis of one of the Autism Spectrum Disorders. Autism, as a “spectrum disorder,” means it manifests itself in many different forms: a diagnosis can range from mild to severe, and though people are likely to exhibit similar traits, they are also individuals with their own personalities and unique human qualities.

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

A diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome was usually given to a person who has an intact or even high IQ and an absence of language delay. Children with Asperger's may appear to be only mildly affected and frequently have good language and cognitive skills. To someone with little experience, a child or person with Asperger's Syndrome may seem like a “normal” individual behaving oddly. People with AS have significant difficulty in social interactions, may understand language literally, have difficulty with conventional social rules and behavior and appear to lack empathy.

One of the major differences between Asperger's Syndrome and Autism is that, by definition, there is no speech delay in Asperger's. In fact, children with Asperger's frequently have good language skills; they simply use language in different ways. Speech patterns may be unusual, lack inflection, have a rhythmic nature, be formal, too loud or high pitched. Children with

Asperger's may not understand the subtleties of language, such as irony and humor, or they may not recognize the give-and-take nature of a conversation.

Another distinction between Asperger's Syndrome and autism concerns cognitive ability. While some individuals with autism experience mental retardation, by definition a person with Asperger's cannot possess a "clinically significant" cognitive delay, and most possess average to above-average intelligence.

What are the most common characteristics of autism?

Every person with autism exhibits a unique combination of autism-related characteristics, and may process and respond to information in unique ways that might seem different to the rest of us. Persons with autism may also exhibit some of the following traits:

- Insistence on sameness; resistance to change
- Difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words
- Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- Laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason; showing distress for reasons not apparent to others
- Preference for being alone; aloof manner
- Tantrums
- Difficulty in mixing with others
- Not wanting to cuddle or be cuddled
- Little or no eye contact
- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Sustained odd play
- Spinning objects
- Obsessive attachment to objects
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain
- No real fears of danger
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Non-responsive to verbal cues; acts as if deaf, although hearing tests in normal range