

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)



By: Laura Villa

Definition

Autism / Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is a developmental disability characterized by significant communication, social and behavioral challenges.

- Communication skills including unusual or delayed language.
- Social skills including social relationships and interactions.
- Behavior including repetitive and/or stereotyped movements & restricted interests.
- People with autism handle information differently than their typically developing peers.
- Autism is often referred to as a **spectrum** disorder (symptoms & characteristics present themselves on a wide spectrum from mild to severe).

Causes of Autism

- The cause of autism has yet to be identified.
 - The current theories of the causes of autism include:
 - Genetics
 - Vaccines
 - Environmental
 - Structural differences in the brain.
- * There is no medical detection or cure!

DSM-5 CRITERIA

In order to be diagnosed as having ASD using the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5) a child must:

Have persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts (few gestures; no pointing pictures in book, toys---points to dog but not back to mom).

The severity levels are based on the amount of support needed, due to challenges with social communication and restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. For example: a person might be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Level 1, Level 2, or Level 3.

The Three Functional Levels of Autism

ASD Level 1 Requiring Support



difficulty initiating social interactions

organization and planning problems can hamper independence

ASD Level 2 Requiring Substantial Support



social interactions limited to narrow special interests

frequent restricted/repetitive behaviors

ASD Level 3 Requiring Very Substantial Support



severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills

great distress/difficulty changing actions or focus

Facts

- 1 in 59 children is diagnosed with autism
- Boys (1 in 37) are 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls (1 in 151).
- Autism affects all ethnic and socioeconomic groups
- 67 children are diagnosed per day
- A new case is diagnosed every 20 minute

**More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes, and cancer combined (autism is the fastest growing serious developmental disability in the U.S.).

Characteristics

- Communication difficulties:
 - Poor or non-verbal communication; delayed; regression language
 - Echolalia or repetitive language, script language, rote language
 - Unusual intonation (sing-song pattern)
 - Literal, concrete
 - Pointing
 - Responding to name
 - Initiation
 - Receptive and expressive language (talk better than they understand or vice versa)
 - Pragmatic language deficits: staying on topic /close proximity/
narrow range of conversational topics

- **Social difficulties:**
 - Limited to fleeting eye contact
 - Difficulty relating to people, objects and events
 - Difficulty with turn taking in play
 - Social engagement
 - Joint attention
 - Reciprocity
 - Imitation
 - Mind blindness / theory of mind: not understanding other people perspectives/feelings (putting self in somebody else's shoes).


- Unusual range of behaviors, activities and restricted interests:
 - Challenging behaviors
 - Repetitive behaviors or behavior patterns - OCD type
 - Repetitive / stereotyped body movements (flapping, stimming/ toe walking)
 - Resistance to changes in routine or familiar surroundings (strong preference for sameness)
 - Poor /limited leisure activities/ preference for manipulating, lining up or classifying objects /unusual play with toys or other objects
 - Narrow range of interest (macaroni boxes, shapes)

Other known characteristics

- Visual learners.
- Wandering.
- Broad range of intelligence.
- Splinter skills (hyperlexia) / savant skills.
- Up and down emotionally.
- Poor incidental learners.
- Unusual fears.
- Unusual food – feeding habits / picky eaters.
- Sensory issues / difficulty processing sensations (sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch and two more: vestibular and proprioception (motor planning)).

What Can Parents Do?

- Encourage all forms of communication.
- Talk to your child.
- Include your child in all family events whenever possible.
- Use visual supports (using schedules, routines, first-then boards, etc).
- Eliminate/alter triggering events.
- Partner with the school and therapists.



Mom and Dad
I know it's hard at times,
Please don't ever give up on me.
Beneath my meltdowns,
troubled talking and limited
eye contact, lies a love for you
and a bond I cannot
express right now.
I love You...

“Love your child with autism”

Always

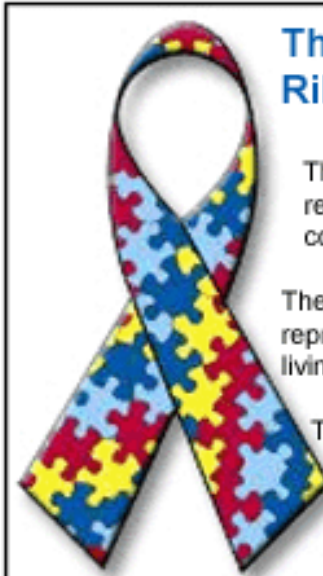
Unique

Totally

Interesting

Sometimes

Mysterious



The Autism Awareness Ribbon:

The puzzle pattern of this ribbon reflects the mystery and complexity of autism.

The different colours and shapes represent the diversity of those living with this disorder.

The brightness of the ribbon signals hope - hope through research and increasing awareness in people like you.

