

AUTISM

FACTS FOR PARENTS

What is Autism?

Autism is developmental disorder that generally becomes evident by the third year of life. Some unusual features may be evident even earlier. Autism causes impairment or disturbance in three main areas:

- Poor Social skills
- Poor Communication (verbal & non-verbal)
- Repetitive and restricted behaviors.
- Abnormal responses to sensations.

All these difficulties manifest in altered behaviour i.e., abnormal ways of relating to people, objects and the environment. Autism is known as a 'spectrum disorder,' because the severity of symptoms ranges from a mild learning and social disability to a severe impairment, with multiple problems and highly unusual behavior.

The disorder may occur alone, or with accompanying problems such as mental retardation or seizures.

Autism is not a rare disorder, being the third most common developmental disorder. One in 68 children have been found to have autistic features. It is more commonly seen in boys. Autism is found throughout the world, in families of all economic, social, and racial backgrounds.

What is a child with autism like?

A child with autism looks just like any other child but has distinctive behaviour patterns. A child who is autistic may enjoy rocking or spinning either himself or other objects and may be happy to repeat the same activity for a long period of time. At other times, the child may move very quickly from one activity to another and may appear to be hyperactive. Many autistic children have sensitivity to certain sounds or touch, and at other times, may appear not to hear anything at all. Autistic children may have very limited pretend play; they may not play appropriately with toys or may prefer to play with objects which are not toys. Autistic children may be able to do some things, like sing songs or recite rhymes very well, but may not be able to do things requiring social skills.

A child with high functioning autism may have a normal or high I.Q., be able to attend a regular school and hold a job later in life. However, this person may have difficulty expressing himself and may not know how to mix with other people. Moderately and more seriously affected children with autism will vary widely. Some autistic children do not ever develop speech, while others may develop speech but still have difficulty using language to communicate. Often,

there is an unusual speech pattern, such as echoing whatever is said to them, repeating a word over and over, reversing "you" and "I" when asking for something, and speaking only to express needs, rather than emotions.

How is autism diagnosed?

There are no medical or genetic tests to detect autism. A diagnosis of autism requires a sensitive and experienced doctor to observe the child very carefully, ask the parents about the development of the child, and then objectively follow internationally recognized criteria for diagnosis. Onset may occur at birth, or a child may have a period of normal development followed by a deterioration of verbal and social skills around 1 1/2-2 1/2 years. Where onset is at birth, the disorder can be detected as early as one year. Autism may occur alongside conditions such as mental retardation and hyperactivity, but the autistic trait in the person requires special attention.

What is the cause of autism?

We still do not know what exactly causes Autism. However, current research indicates that structural or functional damage to the central nervous system may, in some cases, lead to Autism. We know that certain viruses and known genetic conditions are associated with Autism. In addition, there are families that have more than one child with autism. At present, it is believed that about 10% of all cases can be accounted for genetically. It is difficult to tell parents why their child has autism, but it is not caused by an unhappy home environment, both parents working, mental stress during the pregnancy, poor handling by the mother, an emotional trauma, or other psychological factors. You cannot cause a child to become autistic.

Can it be prevented? Can it be cured?

At present, there is no medical cure for autism. The only consistently effective treatment for autism is a supervised structured training program, started early; therefore, a combination of a good school and parent training is very important. **Autistic children can make significant progress if the intervention is early, appropriate and consistent.** Early intervention, before the child is three, is especially crucial to the child's progress. Therefore, an early and accurate diagnosis is so important

How is it different from Mental Retardation?

In mental retardation there is equal lag in all segments of mental development, e.g., motor, communication, social, self-help, cognition etc. In Autism, there is an uneven skill development-- in some areas the child may show age-appropriate skills, in some the skills may be below average and again, in some areas exceptional skills may also be seen.

Can the child ever live an independent life?

Children with Autism have potential for building up their skills and they can be helped if they receive early, well-focused intervention. Depending on the child's individual skill profile and

the appropriateness and intensity of intervention he or she receives, children with Autism can lead relatively independent lives.

What are the chances of his going to a regular school?

Autistic children can be integrated into regular schools, with the support of special education facilities. Most children with Autism have different learning styles from regular children and therefore teaching styles also need to be different. The chances of mainstreaming depend on several factors, like, the child's skill profile, early diagnosis and effective early intervention.

Will my child ever speak? When?

Many autistic children (about 30-50%) do not use speech. It is very difficult to say when and whether the child will ever speak. It is confirmed that there is no difficulty in their physical abilities to speak, but it is their lack of initiative to communicate that stops them from speaking. Some children who might have spoken as infants and then lost their speech may or may not get their speech back. Currently, it is unknown why some children develop speech and others do not. Experience with children with autism has shown that if the environment is accepting, and people are aware of the kind of speech they themselves need to use with the child, it can produce positive results.

Can Speech Therapy help?

Speech Therapy can help some children. It is essential for the speech therapist to understand Autism and the individual child. However, every child with autism can benefit from interventions that help build communication skills, verbal and non-verbal.

Why is he hyperactive?

Most children with Autism are restless because of an impairment of their imaginative and social skills. They cannot play with toys or other children meaningfully and find it very difficult to occupy themselves and become restless. Moreover, their altered sensory perceptions may make them uncomfortable and restless. Hyperactivity can be reduced as the children are taught new skills to keep themselves occupied.

Why does he keep playing with his fingers/ rocking himself back and forth/ spinning around etc.?

Children with Autism respond to sensations differently. These unusual mannerisms like flapping and rocking etc. are natural responses or methods of coping with their sensory difficulties. These behaviours may help them to relax.

Is there any hostel for such children?

In India there are few hostels for people with mental disabilities and ones exclusively for autistic individuals do not exist here. In the early years of development, it is important for an autistic child to live and grow in a home environment. As the child grows up, he can be trained to live in a group home, but it is very important for the autistic people living in such

homes also to integrate with society in general and not just be abandoned in a home or hostel.

Are people with Autism also mentally retarded?

It is very difficult for people with autism to take an IQ test because they may have certain skills but are not able to use them or exhibit them in a test. About 50% of people with autism are also mentally retarded. Autism can occur in association with other difficulties like Cerebral Palsy, Dyslexia, Downs Syndrome, Visual Impairment, and Seizure Disorder.