



Questions & Answers
About Autism

What is Autism?

- Autism is a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain and is a diagnosis based on a child's behaviours. Often it is evident before the child turns three years old.
- Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means there is a wide variation in what autism can look like. **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** includes: Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Rett's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).
- The 'classic' form of autism is referred to as Autistic Disorder. These individuals are often very withdrawn and cannot talk. Those with other ASDs may speak but have great difficulties in holding a meaningful conversation.
- Some people with ASD have below average intelligence; some have average or above average intelligence. One of the hallmarks of ASD is that a person's abilities will be very uneven. For example, capable of doing a puzzle above their age level but unable to discriminate colours. They all share a profound social disability in that they have great problems interacting appropriately in ordinary social situations.

Whom Does Autism Affect?

Autism occurs across the world, in every social class and every race. Four out of five people diagnosed with autism are male. There is controversy surrounding just how common autism is. The latest research points to about one person in every 160 as having an Autism Spectrum Disorder and 1 in 600 as having Autistic Disorder. Some of these people, especially those who have been previously misdiagnosed with other conditions because they are so high-functioning may be receiving inappropriate psychiatric services or interventions for the learning disabled that do not address the central problem of autism. All could benefit from interventions geared to their individual needs.

What Causes Autism?

Poor parenting does not cause autism, although its symptoms can be confused with abuse or neglect. Autism is a biological condition that can be triggered by a number of factors, most of which are not yet understood. One cause is rubella, which can affect the fetus if the mother is exposed during pregnancy. Chromosomal abnormalities including Fragile X and conditions that affect newborns, like infantile spasm, herpes simplex encephalitis and other rare conditions, are also associated with autism. Some people believe that immunizations may cause autism but recent research does not support this theory.

The genetics of autism are now being intensively researched. There is general agreement that there is unlikely to be one single gene that causes autism. Instead it is likely to be an interplay of a number of genes. If a family has one child with autism, the risk of recurrence with other children ranges from 3-8 percent.

What Does Autism Look Like in Young Children?

Autism is called an invisible disability because you can not tell if a person has autism simply by looking at him. Instead, you have to observe the person's behaviours. The following may be some of the signs of autism. One need not have all of them.

- Seems disinterested in sharing enjoyment with others
- No speech or very few words; appear to understand very little.
- May seem deaf. Doesn't respond to speech.
- Unusual sensitivity to light or sound; flickering lights or a vacuum cleaner can provoke uncontrolled screaming.
- May walk on their toes. When excited may flap hands.
- Usually do not make eye contact as typical people do.
- May resist cuddles and hugs.
- Frequently tantrum when required to do anything new or when asked to change activities without advance warning.
- May line up toys and obsess on strange objects.

Detecting Autism in Older Children

While autism is difficult enough to detect in young children, it can be even more complex to diagnose in older children especially when the child appears very intelligent and can speak. According to Lorna Wing, an internationally recognized researcher, children on the spectrum: *“share a triad of impaired social interaction, communication, and imagination, associated with a rigid, repetitive pattern of behaviour ... The triad can be recognized at all levels of intelligence and can occur alone or together with any other physical or psychological disorder.”* Wing, L.(1996) Autistic Spectrum Disorder. *British Medical Journal*, 312

The subtle but equally problematic characteristics of 'high-functioning autism' or Asperger's Syndrome include:

- **Social Deficits:** although they may be very intelligent, they are socially naïve and have great problems and often little interest in making friends. This presents particular problems for school age children who are often the victims of bullying.
- **Perseverating:** many children become expert on very narrow topics on which they amass detailed information that they repeat excessively. They do not understand the concept of turn taking and are insensitive to the needs of other people in conversation.

Is There A Cure For Autism?

There is no known cure for autism. However, autism can be treated and those with autism can learn to communicate and to share in family life. Most parents try a variety of interventions to find what is effective with their child. Research has shown that Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) can be very successful with people with ASD, ideally at as early an age as possible.

Some people who appear classically autistic as young children are able to overcome their symptoms and

become high functioning, usually as a result of their needs being met through an effective early intervention program. Research has shown that the functional ability of most people tends to improve with age. However, if they are not taught communication skills, frustration can lead to severe behaviour problems.

What Should I Look For In An Early Intervention Program?

Sunny Hill Health Centre for Children in Vancouver has done an excellent synopsis of the important components of an early intervention program as researched by G. Dawson & J. Osterling. (Dawson G. & Osterling J. (1997) Early Intervention in Autism. In M.J. Guralnick, (ed.) *The Effectiveness of Early Intervention*). These include:

- Highly structured, predictable and routine
- Direct interaction with a teacher, 1:1 or 1:2 at first
- Minimal distractions
- Holds the child's attention with repetition, predictability, interesting materials
- Provides modeling opportunities
- Uses physical prompts
- May require hand over hand guidance at first and gradually move to modeling or a prompt
- Teach social behaviour first with an adult then gradually move to practice it with 1-2 other children
- Change only one feature of the environment at a time during the process of generalization
- Involve the family
- Child is in the program a minimum of 15 hours a week
- Use of visual cues
- Use of written words, pictures, visual schedules
- Give warning of changes
- A functional analysis of behaviours if problematic

Are There Interventions for Older Children and Adults?

- If people with autism have not had access to appropriate intervention programs when they are young, they can exhibit severe behavioural problems as they reach puberty, particularly if they have never developed language. Frequently, outbursts can be linked to their frustration due to their lack of communication skills.
- One of the important roles of a behavioural consultant is to come up with ways of allowing a person with autism to communicate their needs. Often this is accomplished through building a visual communications system.
- It is essential to set up a consistent behaviour management plan where clear limits are set for behaviours but where the individual with autism has the opportunity to make meaningful choices about how they are going to live their life. The person with autism's physical health should not be neglected. Often behavioural outbursts can be traced to concrete physical ailments which have gone undiagnosed.
- For children and adults who can communicate verbally but engage in inappropriate or even dangerous behaviour, there are a variety of interventions that can allow them to better understand the implications of what they are doing. Social skills training is also essential for many very able people with autism.

Will People with ASD ever be Able to Live Independently?

- Many people with autism do flourish and go on to hold responsible jobs and live independently. Others have the intellectual abilities to be employed but are held back by their inability to adapt socially to the stresses of everyday life.
- The focus of every intervention program for the person with autism should be to work on helping them adapt to living in society. Their quality of life and ability to function is far more important than how they do on an I.Q. test.

Is Help Available For People With Autism?

The Ministry of Children and Family Development (Government of British Columbia) has funding available specifically for children under the age of six with autism diagnoses who are implementing an Early Intensive Intervention Program (aka Under 6 Funding) and also for school aged children (aka Age 6 through 18 Funding) using the teaching methods and principles of ABA. The funding is designated to cover multiple intervention techniques including: Speech/Language Pathology, Occupational/Physical Therapy, Positive Behavioural Support and natural teaching strategies.

There is help for people with autism but it varies throughout B.C. For assistance locating these services or a description of the problems currently facing people with autism in British Columbia, please contact the Autism Society of B.C.

Please give us a call:

**The Autism Society of B.C has a wealth of information on Autism Spectrum Disorder for both parents and professionals
– please do give us a call**

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#301 - 3701 E. Hastings
Burnaby, B.C., V5C 2H6
Tel: (604)434-0880
Toll free: 1(888)437-0880
Fax: (604)434-0801
E-mail: info@autismbc.ca
Website: <http://www.autismbc.ca>

2. Vancouver Island Region Office

13285 Cedar Road
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Tel: (250)714-0801
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E-mail: mjorgensen@autismbc.ca
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3. BC Northern Region Office

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