

## Autism/autistic disorder/childhood autism /infantile autism

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### What is autism?

People with autism have characteristic ways of behaving, communicating and thinking. Some of the most distinctive are listed below, though it is important to recognise that they vary from individual to individual. Many people are affected to such a mild degree that they need no special support other than understanding, tolerance and encouragement. Others have their lives disrupted severely, and will always need special support from others. Some autistic people have learning disabilities; others show high intelligence in learning and problem-solving; still others show isolated areas of high ability. Other difficulties may well accompany the autism: specific learning difficulties, specific language difficulties and dyspraxia are examples. However, the items in the list below are widely agreed to be the distinctive features of autism when they appear in combination.

#### 1 Difficulties interacting socially

Some children with autism enjoy physical and social contact but, generally, these children appear aloof and withdrawn. They are likely to have poor social skills, with little insight into the feelings of others. Special programmes may improve sociability and communication, but underlying difficulties are likely to persist.

#### 2 Difficulties in communication

Some individuals are delayed in acquiring speech, others never learn to speak. Language grows from our need to communicate with each other. Some of the following features may be characteristic difficulties.

- there may be a weak response when others speak, gesture or make facial expressions. Other non-verbal communication, such as eye contact and body language, may also be affected.
- there is often difficulty in beginning conversations and in following them. This weakness is accentuated when the children are in groups.

- children may use words and phrases which do not quite fit the situation. Some may repeat phrases inappropriately, or use particular phrases persistently.
- speech may show unusual patterns of the 'musical' aspects – speed, stress, rhythm, intonation and pitch. These aspects all carry messages and follow social rules.

#### 3 Rigid thinking

Imaginative play is likely to be limited, with interests which are narrow and restricted. Pretend-play with toys such as cars, dolls and dressing-up may be limited, and late to develop. There is a tendency to want to do the same things with objects and people in the same situations. The individual seems rigid, inflexible and stuck in routines, and often becomes distressed by attempts to change things. This may include:

- repeating movements for no obvious purpose – twiddling an object, flicking the hand, banging the head.
- persistent preoccupation with parts of objects – watching a washing machine go round, moving a toy car just to look at the wheels.
- showing obsessive interests – perhaps including remarkable feats of memory, and attention to detail.

When children show autistic behaviour, communication and thinking it is important to recognise their difficulties. Yet, it is equally important to see the children as individuals whose education, sociability and happiness are not determined entirely by the extent of their autism. The response of families, teachers, therapists and other professionals are also important and whilst outcomes for individuals vary enormously, overall greater progress can be expected than was the case twenty years ago.

## References

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**Seach, D** (1998), *Autistic spectrum disorder: Positive approaches for teaching children with ASD*. Tamworth: National Association for Special Educational Needs

**Trevarthen, C, Aitken, K, Papoudi, D, & Robarts, J** (1998), *Children with autism: Diagnosis and interventions to meet their needs (2nd ed.)*. London: Jessica Kingsley

**Wing, L** (1996), *The autistic spectrum*. London: Constable

**Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.**

## Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Semantic and pragmatic disorders (5)
- The autistic spectrum (8)
- Asperger syndrome (11)
- Pervasive developmental disorders (16)
- Dyspraxia/apraxia (19)

## Other organisations which can help

### National Autistic Society

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