

## Pervasive developmental disorders

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### What are pervasive developmental disorders?

This term was first adopted in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. Since then it has been retained and achieved quite widespread acceptance in the Americas. It was chosen to describe both autism and conditions which share similarities with autism. In the UK and continental Europe the term Autistic Spectrum Disorder was developed to serve the same purpose. The word **developmental** emphasises that the problem is present early in the child's life. **Pervasive** implies that many aspects of the child's development are affected.

In the UK and Europe, it is argued that although the disorders are pervasive they are not pervasive of every aspect of development. The term is criticised as uninformative in that it does not describe the nature of the abnormal features associated with the condition. By contrast, many Europeans argue that "autism" has proved to be a relatively viable diagnostic term. It should be retained, they would argue, because it has won wide recognition, describing a difficult condition which requires special help. Also, members of the public are beginning to understand the needs of people with autism. Thus, the term Autistic Spectrum Disorder has a certain useful currency.

In America, however, it is believed that the term **Pervasive Developmental Disorders** has an advantage over autism because it is free from misconceptions about the condition. The argument is that various conditions included in the class of pervasive developmental disorders share some similarities, but the assumption that they all represent some variant of autism is not proven and may not be useful.

### References

**American Psychiatric Association** (2000), *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV-TR (4th ed., text revision)*. Washington DC

**World Health Organization** (1993), *The ICD-10 classification of mental and behavioural disorders: Diagnostic criteria for research*. Geneva

*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)
- Autism (7)
- The autistic spectrum (8)
- Asperger's syndrome (11)

### Other organisations which can help

National Autistic Society  
393 City Road  
London  
N1 0NT  
Tel: 020 7833 2299

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists  
2 White Hart Lane  
London  
SE1 1NX  
Tel: 020 7378 1200

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