



Let's talk about Autism Spectrum Disorders

In this bulletin, we continue our series on problem behavior in pre-school children as highlighted in bulletin 7. We focus on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and provide information on early signs and other important information to help caregivers to understand the early signs. Understanding early signs of ASD will help parents to identify the early warning signs and seek help for their children as soon as possible and prevent later problems. In the next sections of this bulletin, we define ASD and describe the early signs and factors related to their development.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum disorders refer to a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave.

Since the symptoms usually appears in the first two years of life, ASD is often described as a developmental disorder.

A diagnosis of ASD is usually based on individual's:

- Difficulty to communicate and interact with others
- Repetitive behaviors and restricted interests
- Symptoms affecting normal daily functions



Why is Autism a Spectrum Disorder?

Autism is a spectrum disorder because the type and severity of symptoms varies from one individual to the other. The ASD experience is different for everyone and affects people differently and to varying degrees. The abilities and needs of individuals with ASD vary and might change over time. While some persons with ASD are able to live independently, others have severe difficulties that necessitate lifelong care and assistance.

Children with ASD also manifest the symptoms differently. Whereas some children may have difficulty learning, and some have signs of lower than normal intelligence. Other children with ASD may have normal to high intelligence. This category of children are likely to be quick learners but may have communication problems and may difficulty adjusting to social interactions.

Signs and Symptoms of ASD

- ❖ As mentioned earlier individuals living with ASD have difficulty with communication and interaction, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. In the following section we give examples of common types of behaviors in people with a diagnosis of SD.
- ❖ It is important to note that not all individuals with ASD will have all the signs and symptoms listed below, however, most of them will have several of the signs/symptoms listed below.

Social communication/ interaction deficits may include:

- Decreased sharing of interests/emotions/objects with others
- Difficulty appreciating their own and others' emotions
- Difficulty or inconsistent in maintaining eye contact
- Inability to use of non-verbal gestures e.g inability to point at or showing things to others



- Inability to respond or being slow to respond to their names or to other verbal bids for attention
- Lack /delayed speech, or loses previous ability to talk
- Speaks with abnormal tone or rhythm or makes robot-like speech
- Repeats words or phrases said by others but doesn't understand how to use them. E.g. when asked "what is your name?" instead of saying their name they repeat the question.
- Difficulties maintain a conversation
- Interpreting abstract ideas literally
- Difficulty making friends or keeping them
- Problems engaging in imaginative play or pretense play
- Having problems understanding another people's point of view or unable to understand and predict other people's actions
- Responding to social interactions inappropriately e.g by being aggressive, passive, or disruptive
- Specific food preferences e.g refusing foods with a specific texture

Restricted interests and repetitive behaviors may include:

- Inflexibility of behavior, extreme difficulty coping with change
- Performs activities that cause self-harm e.g banging their heads on surfaces, biting etc
- Problems with body coordination/movement e.g. walking on toes, clumsiness
- Having a lasting intense interest in specific topics, e.g details, electronic devices, numbers etc
- Being overly focused on niche subjects/interests e.g interest in moving parts e.g spinning parts of a toy car but doesn't understand the overall function of the object
- Expecting others to be equally interested in subjects or objects they are interested in
- Difficulty tolerating changes in routine and new experiences
- More sensitive or less sensitive than others to sensory e.g. loud noises, temperature
- Abnormal body movements such as hand flapping, rocking, spinning
- Arranging things, often toys, in a very particular manner



Important Note:

Child development occurs in a continuum meaning that children are likely to develop at their own pace, and may not follow the exact timelines common for many children.

However, children with ASD usually show some signs of delayed development before age 2 years. As they grow older, depending on the severity some may become more engaged with other children and adults and show fewer disturbances in behavior and lead a normal life. Other children may continue to have difficulty with language or social skills and during teenage they may develop worse behavior and emotional problems.

When should a parent get worried and seek help?

The symptoms associated with ASD can also be linked to other developmental disorders. A parent/ caregiver should seek for professional help if their child exhibit the following signs as per developmental age.

- If a child doesn't respond with a smile or happy expression by 6 months
- If a child doesn't mimic sounds or facial expressions by 9 months
- If a child doesn't babble or coo by 12 months
- Lack of gesture by 14 months
- If a child doesn't say single words (e.g dada, mama, papa etc) by 16 months
- Difficulty in engaging in pretend play by 18 months
- Difficulty in saying two-word phrases (e.g mama come etc) by 24 months of age
- If a child regresses in language/ completely loses language skills or social skills at any age



Further testing should always be done by the professional to rule out other developmental disorders or physical conditions.

Causes of ASD

There is no single known cause of Autism Spectrum Disorder yet, but there are several factors that can lead to its development as highlighted below:

➤ Genetics

Genetics play a huge role in that, in some cases, ASD can be linked to a present genetic disorder or a fragile X chromosome. For some, genetic mutations increase the risk of developing the disorder while in others, their genes affect the way their brain cells communicate therefore determining the severity of symptoms.

➤ Environmental factors

Researchers are still investigating how factors such as viral infections, medications and complications during pregnancy would trigger the development of ASD.

➤ Sex of a child

Boy children are more likely to develop ASD as compared to girls.

➤ Age of parents

Having children at an older age or babies who are extremely pre-term poses a higher risk of developing ASD. This risk pool also includes children with low birth weight or metabolic imbalances.

➤ History of ASD

There is also an increased risk of having a child with the disorder for families who previously had a child with ASD.

➤ Presence of co-morbidities

The presence of other developmental disorders such as Fragile X syndrome or Rett Syndrome. Such children may experience intellectual problems or autism-like syndromes. It is important to approach a professional for proper diagnosis and treatment.



Diagnosing ASD

Generally diagnosis involves evaluation of behavior and development.

First stage: In younger children it is first done by administering different screening tools and clinical observations.

Second stage: If a child shows signs and symptoms of ASD a second stage evaluation should be conducted. This may involve neurological examination, diagnostic evaluation of cognitive, language, and behavior abilities. Additional history of the child will also be obtained from the caregiver. Additional medical tests may include hearing evaluation and blood tests to rule out existence of other physical illnesses.

The steps in obtaining a diagnosis in older children/adolescents are similar to younger children.

The signs of ASD in older children/adolescents may include:

- They may have difficulty in understanding figures of speech, sarcasm, or humour.
- Difficulty in forming friendships with peers.

In adults, the mental health professional may include an interview with the caregiver to learn more about their developmental history. The information on childhood history is vital as because some ASD symptoms in adulthood can overlap with symptoms of other mental health disorders.

Treatment of ASD

There is no cure for ASD. However, proper diagnosis, intensive, and early treatment of ASD can make a big difference in the lives of children with ASD.

Treatment will usually involved psychological, educational, and skill building intervention. These interventions should be highly structured and intensive, and they may involve caregivers, siblings, and other family members. The interventions may help people with ASD:

- Learn social, communication, and language skills
- Reduce behaviors that interfere with daily functioning
- Increase or build upon strengths
- Learn life skills necessary for living independently



Different intervention as highlighted below can be used:

- ✓ Social skills training
- ✓ Speech and language therapy
- ✓ Occupational therapy
- ✓ Parent management training to help parents understand how to respond and manage problematic behavior
- ✓ Treatment of other co-occurring conditions e.g ADHD, epilepsy, anxiety, depression etc
- ✓ Some caregivers have found it to be useful to try complementary interventions that involve understanding the dietary needs of the child and providing special diets to help their child with ASD to function better.

Medication are only given to treat challenging behaviors/ symptoms such as:

- Irritability
- Aggression
- Repetitive behavior
- Hyperactivity
- Attention problems
- Anxiety and depression

Tips for Parents/Caregivers: How can I Support My child living with ASD?

Tip 1: Provide a structured and consistent routine for your child. This will help them to transition to different activities smoothly

Tip 2: Pay attention to the child's triggers, some children find very loud places to be uncomfortable for them due to their extreme sensory sensitivity to noise.

Tip 3: Find out what motivates your child. Due to their tendency to be intense, caregivers can take the chance to leverage on their interests to impart communication and learning abilities to the child living with ASD.

Tip 4: Try to understand how your child is communicating. Communication may be a bit difficult for some children with ASD due to their uniquely different ability to interpret their environment and interpersonal relationships. Some children may also be unable to verbally



express themselves. Caregivers need to be particularly sensitive to how the child expresses themselves.

Important Tip:

Remember,
communication is not
exclusively about

Tip 5: Engage your child in daily routine activities such as preparing food, simple house chores and tasks, shopping and cleaning. This may help them to be more comfortable with transition and give them a sense of control over their environment.

Tip 6: Set up an environment free of distraction and a safe place to interact.. Some children may have either extremely high sensory sensitivity or low sensitivity.

Tip 7: Find time to play together with your child. Play may help them with transitional problems and reduce tantrums.

Tip 8: Notice how your child interacts with their environment and what their interests are. For example, some children love to be on children YouTube channels such as Baby First, Sesame Street and CoComelon. You may notice them soothing themselves by singing along to specific songs.

Tip 9: Learning about ASD may help you to understand your child better. Keep learning

Tip 10: Get a support group and connect to other parents/caregivers with children living with ASD

Tip 11: Seek for professional help if you have any concerns about your child

Tip 12: Create time for self-care for you and other family members. It can be stressful, exhaustive, and expensive to take care of a child with ASD.



Facts about ASD

Did you know: Over 50 million children have a developmental disability including autism. 95% of these children live in low and middle-income countries. Additionally, 1 in 100 children is on the autism spectrum.

The belief that autism is caused by vaccines is a myth since there is no evidence backing such claims. Causes of autism can range from environmental to genetic factors just to name a few.

In an effort to care for the unique and ever-evolving needs of children with autism there needs to be a collaboration between the health sector and other sectors, specifically in education, employment and social care.

Unfortunately, autistic people are often subject to stigma and discrimination, including unjust deprivation of health care, education and opportunities to engage and participate in their communities.

Additionally, autistic people have higher rates of health-care needs that are not catered for as compared with the general population. This could be caused by care giver and health-care providers' inadequate knowledge and understanding of autism.

On the bright side, scientists are discovering the positive impact of psychosocial interventions in helping improve the quality of life for people living with autism and their care givers by improving their communication and social interaction.

For instance, the WHO has developed a Caregiver Skills Training Programme for Families of Children with Developmental Disorders or Delays where they get to learn how to use play and home activities to aid in learning and development.

Caregivers need to observe their children while interacting and follow their lead. The child may not be able to communicate conventionally, but they definitely know what they want. Another key thing is to make interactions as fun and enjoyable to the child as you can. Also, praise and reassure the child as often as you can. In this way, both you and the child are able to learn how to go about the autism experience and also bond at the same time.

And above all, parents should keep a close eye on their children's developmental progress. If there are consistent delays, regression, or a change in a child's behavior, it is wise for a caregiver to seek the opinion of qualified professionals.