



## Autism

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### What is Autism?

Autism is a neurological disorder that affects the development of social abilities, communication, and behaviour in characteristic ways. The term "autistic spectrum disorder" (ASD) reflects the current view that the effects of ASD can range from relatively mild to severe in any or all of these areas of development. People with ASD face challenges in understanding and relating to others. Although they may be interested in social interactions and relationships, they lack some of the necessary interpersonal skills such as the ability to take another person's point of view (empathy). Problems with language comprehension may make communication difficult for people with ASD. Language difficulties may also be a problem in social situations such as, for example, not being able to begin or keep a two-sided conversation going. People with ASD have repetitive patterns of thinking and behaviour, and a limited variety of interests and activities.

Research shows that ASD is a genetic disorder but the specific causes are not yet known. ASD is a life-long disorder that in more severe forms is usually recognized by 2 or 3 years of age -- usually because the child is not yet speaking and shows little interest in people. However, more subtle signs of ASD may not be recognized until much later, often when the child enters school.

### How is Autism diagnosed?

Autism can be diagnosed by an experienced clinician (usually a clinical child psychologist or a specialist physician). The diagnosis is made by gathering in-depth information about the child's development from parents and others, and by making systematic observations of the child's behaviour -- both what he does that may be unusual, and what he doesn't do that would be expected of a typically-developing child.

With early recognition in young children and a better understanding of both milder and more severe forms in people of all ages, diagnosis of ASD is becoming far more common. Recent estimates suggest that 1 in every 200 children may be affected. The impact of ASD can be overwhelming on families, and the health, education and community services that support them.

### What do we do about Autism? Can Psychology help?

Nonetheless, outcomes for many people with ASD are more positive than in past decades. Advances in psychological research have improved our

understanding of the fundamental challenges faced by people with autism, and have contributed to improve methods of recognizing, assessing, and treating ASD. Psychological assessment of children's ability profiles -- areas of relative strength and weakness -- can guide the development of appropriate programs for children with ASD, and treatments based on psychological principles are at the leading edge of autism intervention.

Evidence shows that early, intensive interventions based on the teaching principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) help children with ASD as part of a comprehensive, individualized treatment program. Key areas for intervention include social skills, communication, daily living skills, academics, self-management or coping skills, and family support. A variety of psychological interventions may be integrated with ABA approaches to meet an individual child's needs. These include incidental teaching (using teaching opportunities that naturally arise every day in the home and community) and structured teaching, which emphasizes organizing the person's environment (schedules, materials and settings) to optimize the individual's ability to learn and function. Peer-mediated interventions in which other children are taught effective ways to interact with a child with ASD can promote more positive social opportunities. For older and more able individuals with ASD, modified cognitive-behavioural strategies in which behaviour is changed by changing the way the person thinks, as well as systematic relaxation therapies, can be used to help manage the anxiety that is often associated with social situations and the unpredictable challenges of daily living.

More information about autism and related disorders can be found at:

- Autism Society Canada, [www.autismsocietycanada.ca](http://www.autismsocietycanada.ca).
- Canadian Autism Intervention Research Network, [www.cairnsite.com](http://www.cairnsite.com).
- National Autistic Society (UK), [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk), [www.nas.uk](http://www.nas.uk).
- National Institute of Mental Health (US) Autism Page, [www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/autism.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/autism.cfm).

Consultation with or referral to a registered psychologist can help guide you as to the use of these therapies