

autism

What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. It is a neurological disorder that affects the development of the brain, causing difficulty with communication, learning, and social interaction.

What are the symptoms of autism?

- *Communication:* language develops slowly or not at all; gestures used instead of words. Sometimes there is a loss of language or regression.
- *Social Interaction:* may spend time alone; shows little interest in making friends.
- *Sensory Impairment:* unusual reactions to physical sensations, overly sensitive to touch.
- *Behaviors:* overactive or very passive; frequent tantrums for no apparent reason; obsessed with a single item, idea, or person; lack of common sense; aggressive or violent behavior.

How prevalent is autism?

Autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), and other developmental disabilities, such as Asperger syndrome, occur in approximately one in every 500 individuals. It is the fourth most common developmental disability, following mental retardation, blindness, and cerebral palsy. Autism is five times more common than Down syndrome and four times more likely to occur in boys than in girls. The number of diagnosed cases of autism and similar disorders has dramatically increased over the past decade.

How is autism diagnosed?

There are no medical tests for diagnosing autism, but when parents become concerned about developmental delays in children, a physician should be consulted. He or she can rule out various potential medical causes, such as hearing and/or voice problems. Before a child can be diagnosed with autism, he or she should be evaluated by a multi-disciplinary team that may include a neurologist, psychologist, developmental pediatrician, speech/language therapist, learning specialist, or another professional knowledgeable about the disorder.

The diagnosis of autism is made when a certain number of characteristics listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) are present in ranges inappropriate for the child's age. A diagnosis of PDD may be made when a child exhibits fewer symptoms than in autism, although the symptoms may be similar to a child with an autism diagnosis.

What causes autism?

Although one specific cause of autism is not known, current research links autism to biological or neurological differences in the brain. Autism is believed to have a genetic basis, although no specific gene has been directly linked to the disorder. Researchers are using advanced brain-imaging technology to examine environmental factors that may contribute to the development of autism. MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scans can show abnormalities in the structure of the brain, with significant cellular differences in the cerebellum.

What can I do?

Most researchers agree that the sooner an autistic child begins an intervention program, the better. At this time, the best approach for autism treatment should involve special educators, psychologists, and speech and occupational therapists. Although medications are sometimes used to manage problematic behaviors of autism, there are currently no medications that effectively treat the core symptoms.

A mainstay of an effective intervention program is applied behavior analysis or ABA. In ABA, scientifically established principles of learning and behavior are combined to address the primary areas of concern in autism — communication, social development, learning, and behavior problems.

How can I find the right program?

Parents should look for a program that provides:

- Direct consultation by senior clinicians (doctoral-level psychologists and board-certified behavior analysts).
- A clear understanding of the function of behavior problems.
- Staff who can clearly describe the design and implementation of an intervention.
- Approaches that are referenced in the professional literature.

“In addition,” says Dennis Russo, Ph.D., ABPP, Chief Clinical Officer at May Institute, “families should strive to create a professional working relationship with educators and clinicians. Autism is a long journey and a partner can make all the difference. Look for professionals who are knowledgeable, caring, and can work well with school administrators.”

Additional resources include:

Autism Society of America (www.autism-society.org), ARC of Massachusetts (arcmass.org), National Alliance for Autism Research (www.naar.org), Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation (www.dougflutiejrfoundation.org), Family Village (www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index), Financial Planning (www.specialneedsplanning.com).

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Both May Institute and May South offer early intervention services, home- and school-based consultation, parent information, and federally funded research and education programs. May Institute operates schools for children and adolescents with autism, PDD, and other developmental disabilities in Chatham, Randolph, West Springfield, and Woburn, Mass., and in Freeport, Maine. May South offers family autism support, community residential living, and has a number of developmental pediatric clinics in Georgia, Florida, and throughout the Southeast.

For more information, contact May Institute at 800-778-7601, www.mayinstitute.org, or May South at 770-956-8511, www.maysouth.org.