

Autism – further information

What is Autism?

Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex lifelong neurological disorder, which typically appears during the first three years of life. Autism is referred to as a “spectrum disorder” because it presents in a wide range of forms – from the most severely affected at one end to those more mildly affected by autism at the other end of the spectrum.

For a diagnosis of autism to be made, the child will have to show problems in three main areas: speech, social problems and repetitive behaviours.

At the more severe end of the spectrum, children and young people with autism may have little or no communication with the outside world and may also have some degree of learning difficulty, or another condition such as epilepsy alongside the autism. Children at this end of the spectrum may be unable to speak, or even communicate with simple gestures like pointing or eye contact. They may be very hard to reach, disruptive, hyperactive, unpredictable and even aggressive to others and themselves.

The word autistic literally means “prefers to be alone” and often a child at the severe end of the spectrum is in his or her own world. These children may require 24/7 care due to their inability to understand the danger from roads, water, electricity, strangers etc. Their days, if undirected, may be spent solely engaging in “self-stimulatory behaviours” or “stims” – for instance, rocking back and forth, making strange sounds, or flapping their hands and bouncing on the spot. Their life and the lives of those who care for them can be extremely stressful. The children most profoundly affected by autism may, without proper intervention, grow into adults who need 24-hour care, often with 2 carers and will remain entirely dependent on family or the state.

At the milder end of the spectrum, children with autism may appear isolated and may not understand the little social conventions which many of us take for granted – such as eye contact when talking to someone, pointing at something to share an interest, waving at someone you know. If they are able to talk their intonation may sound unemotional or they may constantly return to subjects which they find of interest, repeating themselves on a single topic without understanding the need to listen to others. They can experience terrible difficulties in social situations, as they simply don’t know the rules – which neuro typical children pick up naturally. They may have repetitive and limited patterns of behavior and a strong resistance to change. A different colour of cup could lead to a tantrum, because their need for sameness and familiarity is so inbuilt.

Aspergers is a form of autism, which is diagnosed when there are autistic traits but normal speech development and an average or above average IQ on a verbal assessment.

Characteristics of Autism

A child with ASD may appear physically normal but on closer observation may show behaviours like:

- Little or no eye contact
- No pointing or waving
- Lack of social engagement
- Appearing deaf, e.g. never answering own name or even looking round
- Having no words, or even babble
- Playing alone, no interest in other children
- Peculiarly ordering or lining up toys rather than playing with them imaginatively
- Focussing on one tiny part of a toy (e.g. a wheel) rather than the toy overall
- Anxiety over seemingly small things, for instance driving a different way to the park
- Inexplicable tantrums, without being able to communicate why
- Strange “stereotyped” movements – e.g. rocking, flapping
- Fixated interests – for instance, obsessive about Thomas the Tank Engine.

Autism spectrum disorders can occur in association with other physical or psychological disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, Down’s syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, epilepsy, or with a learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or a language disorder. Gastro-enteric problems can also be a feature of autism.

Causes, cure?

No one knows what causes autism and there is no cure, though much research is going into possible genetic and other causes. However, with the right therapies at an early enough age, huge improvements are possible in behaviours, language and academic skills. Much is still to be done in the UK to further the understanding of autism spectrum disorder and the delivery of the right therapies to help improve symptoms and teach children the skills they need to lead more fulfilling and independent lives.

There is no other condition of such complexity, affecting so many children in the UK, about which so little is known and for which society’s response is so inadequate.

At present there are insufficient specialist places in schools for children/young people with autism in the UK. The increase in the number of children being diagnosed with autism means that in years to come there will need to be more specialist places for these children in schools and more planning for how they will live their lives as adults.

Problems with educational approaches to autism in the UK

For children/ young people with autism everything must be taught – not just the ability to talk but even the desire to talk. Not just how to say “hello” to someone

when they meet them, but also that hello should be combined with eye contact. Unlike their peer group, these children absorb little or nothing just from watching others and imitating. Often the skill of imitation itself has to be taught from scratch. Every single skill – from the most basic of self-help skills such as using a toilet, right through to talking or reading – must be broken down into tiny steps, and taught painstakingly. Teaching techniques suitable for neuro typical children simply don't work for those on the autism spectrum.

The prognosis for children and young people with autism who do not receive appropriate education can be bleak. A child at the severe end of the autism spectrum who receives ineffective intervention will become a dependent adult. The cost to the state, in terms of institutionalised care, and to the parents in terms of heartache and 24-hour a day stress, is immense.

Despite the present lack of a cure for autism, much has been achieved in the development of behaviour methods of early intervention for children with autism. With the right system of education, tailored to the particular pupil's needs and problems, the future can be far brighter than the bleak prognosis above.

At BeyondAutism education and early intervention delivered via VB (Verbal Behaviour) is seen as the key to improving the life chances of an individual with autism within society.