

## What is autism? Ways you can help

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Autism is a disability that affects the way a person communicates with other people and relates to the world around them.

People with autism have difficulties in three main areas.

- Difficulty understanding and using language to communicate
- Difficulty in social interaction and relationships with people
- Limited imagination and inflexible thinking.

Many people with autism have unusual reactions to sensations such as sound, light or touch. They may also have learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, or other difficulties.

People with Asperger syndrome, however, do not usually have learning disabilities but share the three main difficulties outlined above.

Autism is more common in men than in women.

People with autism are not physically disabled. Because of this, it can be harder for other people to understand what it is like to have autism.

### **Difficulty with language and communication skills**

People with autism may:

- have difficulty understanding and using gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- find it difficult to respond to questions and instructions
- repeat what has been said. This is called 'echolalia'
- have difficulty in starting and maintaining a conversation
- take phrases literally, which can make it difficult to understand proverbs, jokes, common sayings.
- use complex words, but not understand their meaning
- talk about a special interest they have, not noticing that others do not share this interest
- some people with autism may not develop speech.

The ways you can help

- Get the attention of the person before starting a conversation (for example, tap on their shoulder or say their name).
- Use language at a level that the person can understand.
- Speak clearly and keep your sentences short.
- Don't use indirect language with hidden meanings. A person with autism may answer "yes" to the question "Have you got a watch?" when you meant, "What is the time?"
- Use pictures to help understanding.
- Allow time for the person to respond to what you said.

- Think about other ways of communicating, such as writing, signing or using pictures.

### **Difficulty with social interaction and relationships with people**

People with autism may:

- find it difficult to understand other people's feelings
- find it difficult to express their feelings in an acceptable manner
- want to interact with others, but not know how to do it
- find it difficult to build relationships and friendships
- not understand the 'social rules' for different settings
- not want to share activities with others
- not like meeting people
- find it difficult to recognise other people's emotions, likes and interests
- not seek comfort from others.

The ways you can help

- Accept that the person may need some time alone.
- Try to make your feelings clear. If you feel happy, look and say you are happy.
- Explain the rules for a social situation.
- Encourage the person to interact with others, for example, if they like computers, could they join a computer club?
- Over time, help the person to develop social skills, perhaps by practising situations at home or in school.
- Help the person to understand and explain their feelings. For example, give your child his favourite toy and say, "This makes you happy."

### **Limited imagination and inflexible thinking**

People with autism may:

- enjoy structure and routine
- want to follow the same routine every day
- find change difficult
- find it difficult to understand subjects that require imagination, such as stories
- find it difficult to guess what others are thinking
- have limited interests
- try to impose routines on others
- have difficulty in imaginative play and activities. If you ask a child with autism to draw a house, he may answer "Which house?"

The ways you can help

- Structure the person's day, perhaps by using real objects, photographs, pictures or a written timetable.
- Provide time when they can do their favourite activities.
- Prepare the person for change by telling them about it in advance.
- Use visual means, such as a timetable, to introduce changes.

- Make gradual changes.
- Encourage the person to broaden their interests. If your child collects chocolate wrappers, try to interest him in locating the countries where they are produced. This may lead to him learning more about different countries.
- Help in developing these interests into hobbies, if possible. If your child likes tearing paper, you could try teaching him paper folding or origami.
- Provide opportunities to develop new or different interests. If your teenage child likes water play, encourage him to learn swimming.
- Help in developing imaginative thinking. For example, hold up a piece of paper and ask "What else can you do with this piece of paper?" Possible responses may be fold it, cut it into shapes or wrap something with it.

### **Behaviour**

Because of the difficulties they experience, some people with autism may appear to behave inappropriately because:

- they are trying to communicate
- they do not understand the social rules
- they are feeling anxious, scared or frustrated
- they enjoy a particular activity but do not understand its consequences. For example, one person with autism loved the sound of breaking glass but did not realise it was not safe or acceptable to break glass in public.

Sometimes you may not know why the person with autism is behaving in a particular way. A psychologist, doctor or a specialist teacher may be able to help you.

"Because a child with autism looks 'normal' others assume they are naughty or the parents are not controlling the child. Strangers frequently comment on this 'failing'." *A carer*

The ways you can help

- Work with the person to encourage better means of communication.
- Channel behaviour into socially acceptable forms. For example, if the person likes clapping loudly, encourage them to play a drum.
- If the person is anxious or upset, find a quiet place where they can calm down.
- If you know something such as a favourite toy, helps the child to calm down, keep this nearby.
- Provide alternatives. For example, if the person does not like loud noises, give them earphones to wear when they are outside.
- See a doctor if you think that there may be a medical problem
- Slowly expose them to situations that they are finding difficult.
- Provide time for them to do their favourite activity in a safe environment.

## **Strengths**

- Most people with autism are good at learning visually. Using real objects, pictures, demonstrations and written material can all help.
- Some people with autism have a good eye for detail and accuracy.
- Once learned, information, routine or processes are likely to be retained.
- Some can focus on their special interest for a long time and may choose to work in related areas
- The love of routine can make individuals with autism reliable employees in an organised, structured environment.

## **What causes autism?**

The exact cause of autism is still being investigated. However, research suggests that a combination of factors – genetic and environmental – may account for changes in brain development.

Autism is not caused by a person's upbringing, their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition.

## **Is there a 'cure'?**

There is no known 'cure' . Children with autism grow up to become adults with autism. However, early diagnosis, good education and support can help most people learn skills and progress.

## **For more information**

contact the Autism Helpline  
Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm  
Tel: 0845 070 4004  
Minicom: 0845 070 4003  
Email: [autismhelpline@nas.org.uk](mailto:autismhelpline@nas.org.uk)

The Autism Helpline has a Language Line service which allows us to provide information through an interpreter. Someone has to speak in English at first to let us know which language you speak. We will then call you back.