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What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is a group of developmental disabilities is caused by a problem with the brain. Although, much research is committed to finding a cause, scientists still do not know exactly what causes autism.

ASD can impact a person's functioning at different levels, from very mildly to severely. Typically the symptoms of autism are not physically visible; there is usually nothing about how a person with ASD looks that sets him/her apart from other people. However, people with autism may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most people.

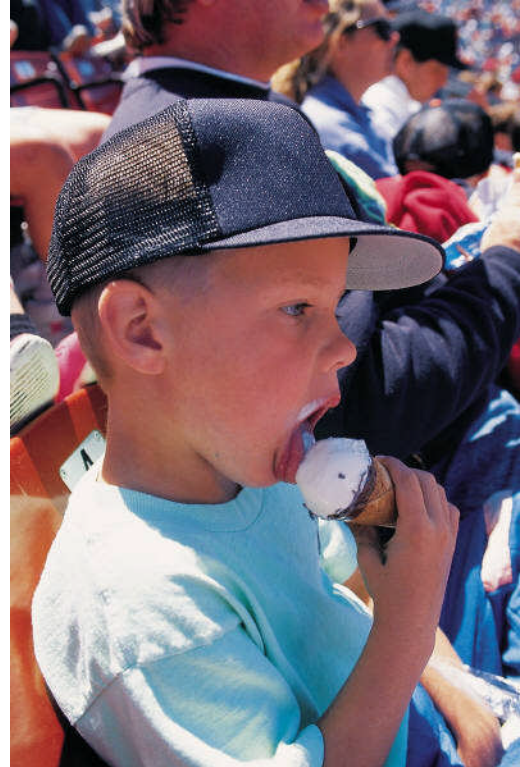


The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASD can vary. Some children can have above average intelligence (gifted) and others can have significant cognitive impairments. All Autism Spectrum Disorders are classified in the medical profession as "Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD)." Under this category, PDD, are three medical diagnoses. The diagnoses included: Autistic disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).



What are the Different Types of Autism?

Not until the middle of the 20th century was there a name for a disorder that now appears to affect an estimated 1 in 150 children, causes disruption in families, and causes endless challenges in the lives of children affected by autism. In 1943 Dr. Leo Kanner of the Johns Hopkins Hospital studied a group of 11 children and introduced the label "early infantile autism" into the English language.



At the same time a German scientist, Dr. Hans Asperger, described a milder form of the disorder that became known as Asperger syndrome. Thus, these two disorders were described and are today listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR as two of the five pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), more often referred to today as autism spectrum disorders (ASD). All these disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills, social interactions, and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior.

ASD can often be reliably detected by age three, and in some cases as early as 18 months. Two Studies suggest that many children eventually may be accurately identified by the age of one year or even younger. The appearance of any of the warning signs of ASD is reason to have a child evaluated by a professional specializing in these disorders.



Autism Treatments and Therapies

Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child. In some cases, the baby seemed "different" from birth, unresponsive to people or focusing intently on one item for long periods of time. The first signs of an ASD can also appear in children who seem to have been developing normally.

When an engaging, babbling toddler suddenly becomes silent, withdrawn, self-abusive, or indifferent to social overtures, something is wrong. Research has shown that parents are usually correct about noticing developmental problems, although they may not realize the specific nature or degree of the problem.



PDD, or ASD, range from a severe form, called autistic disorder, to a milder form, Asperger syndrome. If a child has symptoms of either of these disorders, but does not meet the specific criteria for either, the diagnosis is called pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

Other rare, very severe disorders that are included in the autism spectrum disorders are Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder.



Autism Treatment Options

No two people with ASD are exactly alike. So, each person with an ASD needs a treatment program to meet his or her individual needs and the needs of his or her family. While there is not yet a cure for ASD, early, intensive treatment can help children with the disorder reach their full potential.

Acting early can make a big difference! For guidance on choosing a treatment program, visit the [Treatment Options](#) section of the National Institute of Mental Health's autism website.

It is important to remember that children with ASD can get sick or injured just like children without ASD. Regular medical and dental exams should be part of a child's intervention plan. Often it is hard to tell if a child's behavior is related to ASD or if the behavior is caused by a separate health condition.

For instance, head banging could be a symptom of the ASD, or it could be a sign that the child is having headaches. In those cases, a thorough physical exam is needed.



Even if your child has not been diagnosed with an ASD, he or she may be eligible for early intervention services. The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) says that children under the age of 3 who are at risk of having substantial developmental delays may be eligible for services.



Autism Treatments and Therapies

These services are provided through an early intervention system in your state. Through this system, you can ask for an evaluation. To learn more about early intervention, click here [National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities](#).

- [Behavioral and Educational Interventions](#)
- [Complementary and Alternative Medicine](#)
- [Dietary Changes](#)
- [Medications](#)
- [Additional Treatment Resources](#)



Behavioral and Educational Interventions

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, educational interventions thought to help children with ASDs are those that provide structure, direction, and organization for the child. These interventions must be individualized to the child and take into account his or her overall developmental status and specific strengths and needs.

To learn more about these treatments and interventions, including specific strategies used by physicians to treat ASDs, refer to the [American Academy of Pediatrics' report on diagnosing and managing ASDs](#).



Autism Treatments and Therapies

The National Institute of Mental Health says that psychosocial and behavioral interventions are key parts of comprehensive treatment programs for children with autism. Some of the most common interventions include:

- Applied behavior analysis (ABA)
 - Discrete trial training (DTT)
 - Early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI)
 - Incidental teaching
 - Pivotal response training (PRT)
 - Verbal behavior intervention (VBI)
- Developmental, individual differences, relationship-based approach (DIR also called Floortime)
- Relationship development intervention (RDI)
- Treatment and education of autistic and communication-related handicapped children (TEAACH)



Therapies often used with those listed previously:

- Occupational therapy
- Sensory integration therapy
- Speech therapy
- The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

Go to [Autism Speaks](#), one of CDC's partners, to read more about these therapies.

For more information:

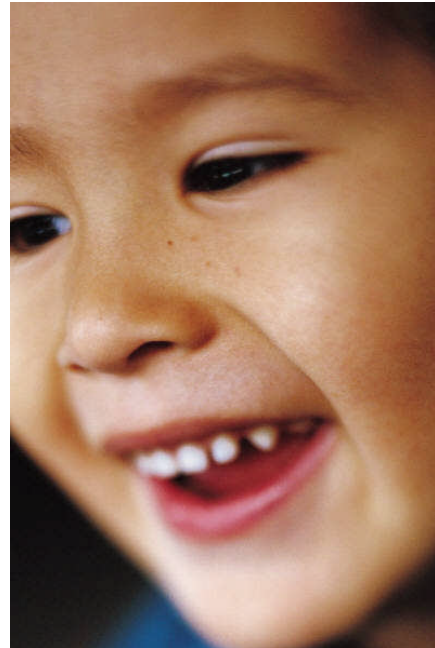
- [Educating Children with Autism](#) by the National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 2001.
- [Preschool Education Programs for Children with Autism](#) (2nd edition). Edited by J.S. Handleman and S. Harris. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed; 2000.



Complementary and Alternative Medicine

There is no known cure for autism. To relieve the symptoms of autism, some parents and providers may use treatments that are outside of what is typically recommended by their pediatrician.

These types of treatments are known as complementary and alternative treatments or CAM. They may include special diets, Chelation (a treatment to remove heavy metals like lead from the body), biologicals (e.g., secretin), or body-based systems (like deep pressure).



The National Institute for Health's (NIH) National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) defines CAM as a group of different medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not part of conventional medicine.

NCCAM divides complementary and alternative treatments into five categories:

- Alternative medical systems (e.g., homeopathy or Chinese medicine)
- Mind-body interventions (e.g., meditation, dance therapy, auditory integration)
- Biologically based therapies (e.g., using herbs, foods, and vitamins)
- Manipulative and body-based methods (e.g., deep pressure, craniosacral therapy)
- Energy therapies (e.g., reiki, electromagnetic fields, etc.)



Autism Treatments and Therapies

There have been efforts to develop a protocol for biomedical interventions for ASD. There are anecdotal reports of success with individual children; however, before this approach can be recommended as a standard treatment, more research is needed on the safety and effectiveness of the various treatments for a variety of people with ASD. To learn more about CAM therapies, go to the NCCAM [Get the Facts](#) webpage.

WORD OF CAUTION: These types of treatments are very controversial. Current research shows that as many as one third of children with autism may have tried complementary or alternative medicine treatments, and up to 10% may be using a potentially dangerous treatment. Before starting such a treatment, check it out carefully, and talk to your child's health care professional.

Dietary Changes

Many biomedical interventions call for changes in diet. Such changes include removing certain types of foods from a child's diet and using vitamin or mineral supplements.

WORD OF CAUTION If you are thinking about changing your child's diet, talk to his or her health care professional first. Or talk with a nutritionist to be sure your child is getting the essential nutrients he or she needs.

Dietary treatments are based on the idea that food allergies cause symptoms of autism or that the lack of a specific vitamin or mineral may cause some autistic symptoms.



Some parents feel that changes in their child's diet may make a difference in how the child feels or acts. The National Institute of Mental Health, part of NIH, does [studies](#) to test how well various biomedical interventions work.

Medications

No medication can cure ASDs or treat the core symptoms that make up the disorder—that is, communication, social, and repetitive or unusual behaviors. But medications can help with some of the symptoms of autism in some people.

For instance, medication might help with a person's high energy levels, inability to focus, depression, or seizures. Also, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved the use of risperidone (an antipsychotic drug) to treat 5- to 16-year-old children with ASDs who have severe tantrums, aggression, and self-injurious behavior.



Medications may not affect a person with an ASD in the same way they would affect another person.



Autism Treatments and Therapies

So, it is important to work with a health care professional who has experience treating people with ASDs. Also, parents must watch their child's progress and reactions while he or she is taking a medication to be sure that the side effects of the treatment do not outweigh the benefits.

Find out more about medications and ASDs on the [National Institute of Mental Health autism website](#).



Additional Treatment Resources

- [The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders](#) has a website to help individuals with autism who have communication needs.
- [The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research](#) has a website to help professionals with the oral health care needs of patients with autism.
- [Clinical Trials.Gov](#) lists federally funded studies that are looking for participants. If you or someone you know would like to take part in an autism study, go to the website and search "autism."

The [Autism Treatment Network](#) (ATN) seeks to create standards of medical treatment that will be made broadly available to physicians, researchers, parents, policy makers, and others who want to improve the care of individuals with autism.

ATN is also developing a shared national medical database to record the results of treatments and studies at any of their five established regional treatment centers.



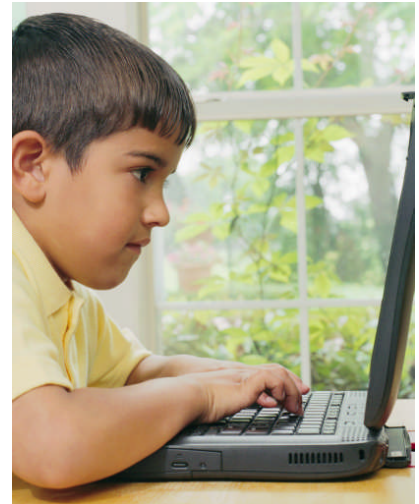
Autism Therapy Options

Although therapies and treatments for Autism are really one in the same, for this report they have been separated. In this section, we're going to discuss primarily three forms of therapy solutions, which are available to help people with Autism.

These three types of therapy are:

- Speech Therapies
- Occupational Therapies
- Music Therapies

In the next few pages, you will learn a little about each of these Autism therapies.



Autism Speech Therapy

Speech therapies for people with autism seek to improve aspects of communication such as comprehension, expressions, sound production and social language skills. These communication skills may be taught in the form of verbal communication, or may be taught through the use of picture symbols or sign language.

It is important for speech therapies to start as early in life as possible for a person with Autism. The therapies should teach practical life experiences and should encourage spontaneous communication. For long term success of speech therapies, it is vital for caregivers or parents of children with Autism to practice and reinforce what is learned during each speech therapy lesson and incorporate those skills into everyday life.



Autism Treatments and Therapies

Communication skills are very important to people with Autism. This is to help them cope with normal activities of daily living (ADLs). It is also to help them express problems and issues they may be experiencing to minimize unacceptable behavior.

Just like any therapy or treatment, there are many types of speech therapies for people with Autism. It is not uncommon for a speech therapist to use one or more of the following types of speech therapy:

- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)
- Discrete Trial Training
- Facilitated Communication
- Functional Communications Training (FCT)
- Circle of Friends
- Motivational Therapies
- Mand Training
- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
- Generalized Imitation Therapy
- Sign Language Therapy
- Social Stories & Scripts
- Relationship Development Intervention



If you feel you need speech therapy for a child with Autism, you should consult your physician, your child's school counselor or contact your insurance company or Medicaid and get a referral to a speech therapist who specializes in Autism-related therapies.



Occupational Therapy & Autism

Occupational therapy helps people with disabilities to become more independent in their normal daily living activities. Daily living activities can include anything from potty training to modifying a work office to increase productivity for a person with a disability.

When talking about people with autism, they might need help from an occupational therapist to help learn how to play, perform self-care skills, or increase school performance. Autism affects the occupations of many children with autism, therefore, making occupational therapy a vital component of a child's program.

Some of the common therapy techniques used by Occupational Therapists for a Person with Autism include:

- Floortime Therapies
- Behavioral Intervention Therapies
- Assistive Technology
- Visual Strategies
- Sensory Diets
- Discrete Trial Training
- Social Skills Training



If you feel you need occupational therapy for a child with Autism, you should consult your physician, your child's school counselor or contact your insurance company or Medicaid and get a referral to an occupational therapist who specializes in Autism-related therapies.