

Autism

Autism is a lifelong communication and social disorder that affects how a person makes sense of the world around them and communicates and interacts with others. It is often called a 'hidden disability' as it is not always apparent to others.

All individuals with autism exhibit, to a greater or lesser degree, a Triad of Impairment, which is the defining characteristic of autism, as identified by Dr. Lorna Wing.

- **Socialisation Difficulties** with social relationships, poor social timing, lack of social empathy, rejection of normal body contact, inappropriate eye contact.
- **Communication Language** impairment across all modes of communication: speech, intonation, gesture, facial expression and other body language.
- **Inflexibility of thought rigidity and inflexibility of thought process:** resistance to change, special interests and ritualistic behaviour, may parallel play as opposed to playing and interacting with peers.

Alongside the triad there may be sensory issues often referred to as the fourth strand. People with autism may be under or over sensitive to sights, sounds, smell, taste and touch.

Autism is a very complex and individual disorder. The autism spectrum covers a huge range of abilities and all people on the spectrum are individuals with their own personalities, strengths and weaknesses. It is the 'Triad of Impairment' that is common to all people with autism.

WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

To date, there is no clear answer to this question. It is believed to be present from birth (in most cases – though there is debate about whether it can develop later). It appears to have some genetic predisposing factors and is associated with some types of brain damage. Research is being done on the possibility that allergies and dietary intolerances play a part. It is clear that it is not caused by bad parenting – an idea which, thankfully, has been discredited.

It is unlikely that any single cause is going to be found. It is probable that a number of factors are operating together to give rise to the condition. As yet, there is no proven cure. As work progresses in this area it may be that prevention or improved treatment may be a possibility.

Language and communication

People with autism have difficulty understanding the meaning of words and the intention of the speaker; they take things literally and are not able to interpret gestures, intonation, facial expressions or body language. Many children will have delayed speech and some may not develop speech at all and will need other communication aids e.g. pictures, photos, gestures etc. Eye contact will be difficult for them.

Inflexibility of thought and imagination

People with autism have difficulty manipulating thoughts in an imaginative way. They may become unduly upset by any changes in their known pattern of life or routine. They may have

a tendency towards repetitive actions within a restrictive range, such as body rocking, hand or arm flapping. They do not usually play with toys conventionally; they may watch one part of it or do the same thing to it for long periods. Imaginative play is limited, especially if other children are involved, although some children can imitate something they have seen. They may not see danger in things like crossing the road, jumping from a window.

Lack of social skills

People with autism have little or no understanding of normal social interaction. They do not automatically make relationships and have difficulty understanding that other people have feelings, thoughts and intentions. They will have difficulty relating to and communicating with others, or taking others' feelings into account. Some will prefer to be alone and do not look to others for company; others will want friends and relationships but do not have the skills to manage and maintain them. They can not always offer sympathy and empathy to others as they may not have any concept of this.

Sensory perception and responses

Some children will be over-sensitive to certain sounds, smells, sights, lights and textures. They may react to changes in their clothing, food, noise and light levels. Their daily environment should be 'autism friendly' – secure so that they cannot wander into unsafe areas, visually helpful as to what is in or behind cupboards, drawers, doors etc. As well as being

hypersensitive to some stimuli, children with autism may have very high pain thresholds, so any playtime or classroom accident should be carefully checked.

People with autism have a different view of what is important. Their perceptions are different. People with autism view the world in a different way. Different aspects of the environment interest them. It is important to note that the world is different. It is not necessarily wrong or a lesser way of being. We should always respect the rights of people with autism to be themselves. However, the world in general does not share their view of life. If children with autism are to have any chance of taking part in our world we must try to help them to understand it and make sense of it in the best way they can. We also need to learn about autism so that we can understand and make changes in how we perceive people with autism, how we approach them, speak to them and make adaptations and allowances for them. Who is to say that their views and thoughts are not valid and not to be respected?

It is also important to remember that people with autism are not immune to other illnesses or disabilities. It is tempting to attribute every difficulty experienced to the autism but it may be due to deafness, depression or even just the normal behaviour of a boisterous and mischievous child. As with any child, a child with autism will be influenced by their own personality, family characteristics, their own strengths and weaknesses.

Autism

Children with autism find listening and giving attention to the spoken word very difficult. Make it easier for them by keeping unnecessary chat to a minimum. Speak clearly and calmly; ensure you have their attention before speaking and allow lots of time for them to make sense of what you have said.

Useful Contacts

The National Autistic Society

The largest autism charity in the UK can help with local support groups; information on autism for individuals, parents, professionals; befriending; training; links and much more.

Website: www.autism.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 4104 (M to F, 10am-4pm)

Parent to Parent line: 0808 800 4106

Education Rights Service: 0808 800 4102

BIBIC (British Institute for Brain Injured Children)

They help children with conditions affecting their social, communication and learning abilities. There is a National Assessment Centre in Somerset, a team of Lottery-funded Outreach Therapists working closely with families in their own homes across the UK.

Website: www.bibic.org.uk

Email: info@bibic.org.uk

Tel: 01278 684060

Cerebra

For parents of children with brain injuries and neurological problems including Asperger syndrome and autism. Has a helpline, regional Parent Support workers, telephone counselling service, sleep service, DLA Guides, grants scheme, speech and language therapy voucher scheme, holiday home and more.

Website: www.cerebra.org.uk

Email: info@cerebra.org.uk

Parent Support Helpline: 0800 328 1159

Contact a Family

UK wide advice on all aspects of caring for a child with any special need, disability or rare disorder; national SEN help line; downloadable fact sheets and publications; Connected magazine; local support groups and parent reps; campaigns and research etc.

Website: www.cafamily.org.uk

Tel: 0808 808 3555

Email: info@cafamily.org.uk

They also run a separate site Making Contact where you can share your experiences, get advice or local support from other parents with children with the same condition.

Website: www.makingcontact.org.uk

The Disabilities Trust

Provides a range of specialist education services, housing and support for children and adults with autism; also has an Autism Awareness website – a meeting point for people concerned with autism.

Website: www.disabilities-trust.org.uk

and www.autism-awareness.org.uk

Tel: 01444 239123

Peach

(Parents for the Early Intervention of Autism)

A parent-led charity to promote early behavioural intervention for young children with autism, Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), often called the Lovaas Programme. Provides information to families starting a home programme and can put them in touch with other families in their area.

Website: www.peach.org.uk

Tel: 01344 882248

Autism NI (PAPA)

The main Northern Ireland Autism Charity it has Autism Resource Officers and Parent Liaison Officers (who work both full and part time in many regional areas), who are committed to supporting all families with the many issues and challenges they may face; training for carers, parents and professionals; lobbying.

Website: www.autismni.org

Email: info@autismni.org

Helpline: 028 904 01729 (M, W, F 9.30am-1pm)

Autism Network N.I.

Based in Northern Ireland, they have a helpline, parent support groups, social groups, adult groups, advocacy and Teens and Twenties social outing groups.

Website: www.autismnetworkni.org.uk

Helpline: 028 92 611851

The main autism charity in Scotland with support and training for parents, a helpline, children's services, adult services, diagnostic centre and more.

Website: www.scottishautism.org

Email: autism@scottishautism.org

Tel: 01259 720044

Irish Autism Action

Awareness raising, early detection diagnosis, education support, advocacy, counselling, helpline, home based support, transition planning, social housing, research information and advice for families upon receiving diagnosis.

Website: www.autismireland.ie

Email: info@autismireland.ie

Tel: +353 44 933 1609

FURTHER READING

Cambian free Information Sheets

Includes for ASC: Behaviour Support; Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour; Motivation; Sensory Issues and Coexisting Conditions; Social Skills; Stress and Anxiety; Educational Issues; various coexisting conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, Tourette's, SEN advice.

See the Cambian information sheet

'Books – where to find them' for a list of specialist publishers with a huge range of books, especially www.autism.org.uk and www.jkp.com

Every Child Matters:

Change for Children – Autism

a booklet from the Department of Education: www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Autism-Exemplar.pdf

Scottish Autism

Autism

INTERNET SITES

www.aboutautism.org.uk is a website written by the parents of a child with autism to share as much information as possible.

www.autism-awareness.org.uk a site run by The Disabilities Trust where people can share ideas, views and information.

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk AET is dedicated to coordinating and improving education support for all children on the autism spectrum in England. Downloadable resources and toolkits for education staff.

www.autism.com the website of the Autism Research Institute in US which contains lots on information for families and individual.

www.daysout.com a one stop directory for great family days out – attractions which have good facilities and access for visitors with disabilities and special needs have a specific identifying symbol.

www.healthtalkonline.org/autism has 4 sections called 'Parents of Children with Autism', 'Life on the autistic spectrum', 'Having a sibling on the autistic spectrum' and 'Having a grandchild on the autistic spectrum' which features the everyday experiences of people affected by the condition (can be found in the 'Autism' section).

www.mugsy.org is the website of The NAS (Surrey Branch), an excellent site with lots of up to date information, news, and resources wherever you are in the country.

www.paains.org.uk Public Autism Awareness –

a gentle step by step guide into the fascinating and rewarding world of Autism.

www.users.dircon.co.uk/~cns/ is a site for students with autism & AS at college or university.

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All the information sheets are checked and amended annually. Please ensure you have the current version.



Cambian is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities. www.cambianguroup.com

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