

CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism is a disability that causes problems with communication and social interaction. Symptoms usually start before age three. Delays or deficits in many skills develop from infancy to adulthood. Different people with autism can have very different symptoms and very different functioning levels. In other words, autism is a “spectrum” disorder. One person may have mild symptoms, while another may have severe symptoms. Like everyone else, **no two people with ASD are alike.** This means that a person with ASD will not necessarily display *all* of these characteristics, but will have some disability in each of the areas of communication, socialization, and flexibility. These characteristics also exist in typical people, but in the case of ASD, there are more of them in each person, and they are more intense. The main signs and symptoms of autism involve problems in the following areas:

Communication

- Speech may be slow to develop, delayed, or there may be no speech at all
- May be no or little use of nonverbal communication (pointing and gesturing)
- May struggle to receptively or expressively label places, people, objects
- If verbal, may not know how to start, sustain, or end conversations
- Content and grammar may be delayed, while speech skills might not be delayed
- May display unusual tone of voice (e.g. monotone, robotic, or high pitch)
- May have a rigid understanding of words, and have difficulty with the concept that objects can have more than one name
- May be less likely to make bids for social attention (e.g. “Watch me!”)
- May reverse pronouns
- May not respond to their own name consistently
- May not be able to express wants and needs



- May not follow directions
- May appear not to hear at times
- May not point or wave “bye-bye”
- May not accurately interpret puns, sarcasm, idioms, etc.
- May be less likely to make comments (e.g. “Look at that”), or ask questions (“What’s your name?”)
- May seem very independent for his/her age

Social Interaction

- May have difficulties sharing emotions, understanding how others think and feel, and holding a conversation
- Eye contact may not be as frequent or last as long as in other children
- May not appear to notice others and seem to tune people out
- Has difficulty building relationships with others of the same age
- May not share attention with others, such as by showing something, pointing, or pointing out interests or accomplishments
- Does not demonstrate emotional reciprocity (taking turns)
- Infrequently takes turns in play or conversation
- Rarely imitates the actions of others in play or otherwise
- May not respond to own name
- Has difficulty in making and maintaining friendships



- May not consistently smile when smiled at
- May seem to prefer to play alone
- May have difficulty with imaginative/pretend play
- May be overly active, uncooperative, or resistant
- Does not know how to play with toys the way they were intended
- Seems to be in his / her “own world”
- May not be interested in other children
- May not know how to act appropriately in public
- May be overly friendly to strangers

Restrictive, Repetitive, and Stereotyped Behavior

- May have an unusually strong or focused interest or fixation (such as a television program, certain toys, or games)
- May repeat words, questions, or phrases and cannot move on to other topics
- May repeat certain actions and get “stuck” doing the same things over and over, (e.g. closing doors, flicking lights) and cannot move on to other things
- May obsessively follow daily routines or schedules and be unable or unwilling to be flexible in changing these routines
- May have a difficult time transitioning to a different activity
- May express high levels of anxiety regarding specific objects or events (e.g. weather events, specific machines)
- May play in repetitive ways



- May demonstrate repetitive body or other motor movements, such as spinning, rocking, or finger flicking
- May show intense interest in parts of objects, as opposed to using an entire toy or object
- May have movements that result in self-injury, such as scratching eyes, skin picking, biting hands, and head banging
- May demonstrate increased sensitivity to certain textures, tastes, and smells
- May demonstrate increased sensitivity to visual and/or auditory stimulation
- May seek out additional sensory stimulation in atypical ways (e.g. licking objects, eating non-foods, smelling objects, closing one eye to gaze at object)
- May resist certain food groups or food textures
- May spend a lot of time lining things up or putting things in piles or rows
- May have odd movement patterns
- May walk on his/her toes
- May display tantrums that are atypical in terms of frequency, intensity, and/or duration
- May have over-sensitivity to light or aversion to certain textures, both taste and tactile (clothing tags, certain materials)
- May have stronger than typical aversion to certain sounds, such as the toilet flushing or the blender.
- May have stronger than typical fascination with certain visual stimuli (watching water flow, beads drop from a sensory toy) or sound stimuli (the toilet flushing or musical toy).
- May have stronger than typical aversion to crowds or noisy environments
- May have over-sensitivity to certain smells

Cognitive Differences

- **May show impaired Theory of Mind:** the understanding that others have thoughts and feelings that may be different than yours. Theory of mind allows us to modify our behavior based on an understanding of another person's perception. Some people refer to deficits in theory of mind as "mindblindness." Impaired theory of mind can lead to behaviors such as making insensitive comments, misinterpreting others' intentions, and arguing that one's own perspective is always right.
- **May show weak Central Coherence:** the ability to see the bigger picture in a situation. Individuals with autism tend to be extremely detail focused and "miss the forest for the trees." Weak Central Coherence can lead to difficulties understanding the main point of a text or conversation, picking out the relevant versus irrelevant, distinguishing minor versus major problems, and generalizing a skill learned from one setting to another setting.
- **May show Executive Dysfunction deficits:** the set of abilities that people use to manage themselves in order to achieve a goal. Executive functioning includes skills such as inhibition, shifting, emotional control, initiation, working memory, planning/organizing, organization of materials, and self-monitoring. Problems with executive functioning can lead difficulties focusing, being flexible, organizing materials and schoolwork, and managing emotions appropriately.
- **May show Literal/Concrete Thinking:** they may have difficulty with abstraction and conceptual thinking and abstract language skills such as understanding metaphors, sarcasm, idioms, and innuendos. Literal and concrete thinking can lead to behaviors such as misunderstanding sarcastic jokes, not understanding time and money, and having difficulty transferring what is learned in one setting to another.
- **May show Processing Deficits:** they may process information more slowly than their same-aged peers, even when other skills are very advanced. They also have difficulty focusing on and processing language, as opposed to their very strong visual skills. Individuals with processing deficits show behaviors including failing to pay attention to directions, lack of responding to others, slowness in responding, and aptitude for visually based skills and learning.

