

[HOME](#) » [FAMILIES/YOUTH](#) » Facts for Families



Autism Spectrum Disorders

No. 11; Updated June 2018

Most infants and young children are very social creatures who need and want contact with others to thrive and grow. They smile, cuddle, laugh, and respond eagerly to games like "peek-a-boo" or hide-and-seek. Occasionally, however, a child does not interact in this expected manner. Instead, the child seems to exist in his or her own world, a place characterized by repetitive routines, odd and peculiar behaviors, problems in communication, and a total lack of social awareness or interest in others. These are characteristics of a developmental disorder called autism.

Autism is usually identified by the time a child is 30 months old. It is often discovered when parents become concerned that their child may be deaf, is not yet talking, talks in an unusual way, stopped talking, resists cuddling, and avoids interaction with others.

Some of the early signs and symptoms which suggest a young child may need further evaluation for autism include:

- no smiling by six months of age
- no back and forth sharing of sounds, smiles or facial expressions by nine months
- not responding when their name is called
- no babbling, pointing, reaching or waving by 12 months
- no single words by 16 months
- no two word phrases by 24 months
- regression in development
- any loss of speech, babbling or social skills

A preschool age child with "classic" autism is generally withdrawn, aloof, and fails to respond to other people. Many of these children will not even make eye contact. They may also engage in odd or ritualistic behaviors like rocking, hand flapping, or an obsessive need to maintain order.

Many children with autism do not speak at all. Those who do may speak in rhyme, have echolalia (repeating a person's words like an echo), refer to themselves as a "he" or "she," or use peculiar language.

The severity of autism varies widely, from mild to severe. Some children are very bright and do well in school, although they have problems with school adjustment and peer interactions. They may be able to live independently when they grow up. Other children with autism function at a much lower level. Intellectual disability is commonly associated with autism.

Occasionally, a child with autism may display an extraordinary talent in art, music, or another specific area.

The cause of autism remains unknown, although current theories indicate a problem with the function or structure of the central nervous system. What we do know, however, is that parents do not cause autism, and childhood vaccines do not cause autism.

Children with autism need a comprehensive evaluation and specialized language services, behavioral, and educational programs. Some children with autism may also benefit from treatment with medication. Child and adolescent psychiatrists are trained to diagnose autism, and to help families design and implement an appropriate treatment plan. They can also help families cope with the stress which may be associated with having a child with autism.

Although there is no cure for autism, appropriate specialized treatment provided early in life can have a positive impact on the child's development and produce an overall reduction in disruptive behaviors and symptoms.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

If you find *Facts for Families*© helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality, consider donating to the [Campaign for America's Kids](#). Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute *Facts for Families*, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to *Campaign for America's Kids*, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 10,000 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families© information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by AACAP. Hard copies of *Facts* sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All *Facts* can be viewed and printed from the AACAP website (www.aacap.org). *Facts* sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other website without written consent from AACAP. Organizations are permitted to create links to AACAP's website and specific *Facts* sheets. For all questions please contact the AACAP Communications Manager, ext. 154.

If you need immediate assistance, please dial 911.

Copyright © 2022 by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.