

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), also known as autism, is a lifelong disability that begins at birth or shortly afterwards. Autism affects how a person learns and how they interact with other people and their surroundings.

Signs include:

- differences in social and communication development
- narrow interests and repetitive behaviour.

No two people with autism are alike, which is why we talk about a spectrum.

People with autism have a range of mental abilities, ages, behaviours, social understanding and communication skills.

History

The word autism comes from the Greek word 'autos' and means self. It was first identified as a disorder in the middle of the 20th century, though folklore suggests that there have always been people with autism. The basis of our current understanding of autism comes from papers written in the early 1940s by Leo Kanner (1943) and Dr Hans Asperger (1944). In their papers they both described similar features present in the children they were working with. Other important researchers who have helped shaped our understanding are Lorna Wing and Christopher Gillberg. The personal stories of Temple Grandin, Luke Jackson and other people with autism, have also helped to develop our knowledge of the condition.

How is autism diagnosed?

In Australia, autism is most commonly diagnosed using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5). Usually a paediatrician or a team of specialists will complete an assessment and diagnosis is usually made by a paediatrician or a team of specialists.

For more information on the DSM-5 see -

http://www.positivepartnerships.com.au/orionfiles/upload/public/files/Fact%20Sheet%2010_DS M-5_Nov13.pdf

How common is autism?

The most recent review in Australia (MacDermott et al., 2007) shows one child for every 160 children between the age of six and 12 is diagnosed with autism each year. More males than females are diagnosed with autism.

Causes

Autism has no known cause. Research suggests that a mixture of genetic and environmental factors (both before and after birth) may be linked to the cause. Research also suggests that the cause is likely to be different for each person.

Main features of autism

Communication

Communication is the ability to express needs and wants and to understand others. People with autism may have speech, but:

- have difficulty understanding others
- interpret questions and comments in very literal way
- don't easily understand metaphors or words with multiple meanings
- find starting and holding a conversation hard
- speak like an adult
- repeat words and phrases again and again.

Communication difficulties also affect how the person socialises.

Socialisation

Socialisation is how a person relates to others in a group.

People with autism may have little understanding of social rules, like to play alone, not know how to join in a game/activity and sometimes even appear rude.

Behaviour

People with autism often have rituals and repetitive behaviour. This helps them feel like they have a sense of calm and order. People with autism may:

- need routine
- dislike change

- have a strong interest in one topic
- have odd body movements.

Sensory processing

Sensory processing is a term that refers to the way the brain receives and uses information from our senses. Sensory processing differences affect a child's ability to learn and behave at home, school and in the community. People with autism may over react or under react to:

- noise
- touch
- visual information
- smells
- taste
- movement
- people or objects being near them.

Learner profile

Each child with autism is different, however these are the areas they most often find difficult:

- change
- attention and concentration
- social interactions
- emotions
- muscle and movement coordination
- focusing their eye gaze
- understanding meaning
- transferring skills learnt in one place to another place
- sensory processing
- sequencing (understanding a sequence of events)

- planning and organisation
- motivation.

Students with autism have lots of strengths, including:

- good memory
- following routines and rules
- motivation and strong knowledge in certain topics
- visual learners
- honest.

These strengths and difficulties mean students with autism often have a spiked learning profile. A good teaching strategy focuses on the areas of strength rather than simply trying to improve the areas of difficulty.

References

Asperger, H. (1944) Translated & annotated, Frith, U. (1991). 'Autistic psychopathy' in childhood, In U. Frith (1991), *Autism and Asperger syndrome* (pp. 37–92). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kanner, L. (1943). Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child*, 2, 217-250.

MacDermott, S., Williams, K., Ridley, G., Glasson, E. & Wray, J. (2007). The prevalence of autism in Australia. Can it be established from existing data? A report for the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders. Retrieved January 23, 2008, from: www.autismaus.com.au.