

A Brief Introduction to Autism

- Autism is one of five disorders grouped under the heading of Pervasive Development Disorder, a category of neurological disorders.
- This grouping also includes Asperger's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Rett's Disorder and PDD-Not Otherwise Specified
- The overall incidence of autism is consistent around the world, though it is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls.
- Although defined by a certain set of behaviors, children and adults with autism can exhibit any combination of these behaviors in any degree of severity. Two individuals with autism can act completely differently from one another and have varying capabilities.
- Every person with autism is an individual and as such has a unique personality, and processes and responds to information in unique ways.
- Some common behaviors associated with autism are: resistance to change/desire for rhythm and routine, repeating words or phrases in place of usual, responsive speech, laughing or crying for no overtly apparent reason or for seemingly inappropriate reasons, attachment to objects, uneven gross/fine motor skills, apparent under or over sensitivity to pain, difficulty in mixing with others...
- Sensory integration is a challenge. Sensory perception may be heightened or underactive.
- Contrary to popular belief, autistic individuals can and do make eye contact, can develop good functional language and can develop relationships and show affection. However, the manner and degree to which this happens may vary from the general population and between autistic individuals.

HOW IS AUTISM DIAGNOSED?

Autism is usually recognized in the first three years of life. Pediatricians, Child psychiatrists and psychologists with experience on autism can diagnose children with autism. However, as autism is a relatively rare but complex condition, it is advisable that a team of professionals perform the diagnosis.

The team should include at least:

- a developmental pediatrician
- a psychologist or psychiatrist
- a speech pathologist

IS HELP AVAILABLE?

Yes! Many resources are available for families of children with autism:

Ministry of Social Services

The Ministry of Social Services offers a package of behavioural and family support services for children with autism. For more information on programs and services in your area, call your local M.S.S. office for Services to People with Mental Handicaps. The number is listed in the Provincial Government Blue Pages of the telephone directory, under Ministry of Social Services.

Autism Society of British Columbia is:

- a non-profit, charitable organization
- A provincial resource of the Ministry of Social Services
- A chapter of Autism Society Canada

Our Mission is:

To promote understanding, acceptance and full community inclusion for people with autism in British Columbia while providing support for the realization of the rights and informed choices of individuals with autism and their families.

Our Mandate is:

To support families by providing:

- Parent Training
- Parent Support Groups
- Parent Support Network
- Crisis Support and Referral
- Lifestyle Services Planning
- Integrated Summer Programs
- Volunteer Buddy Program
- Newsletter
- Resource Library
- Information
- Training Videos

FOR HELP CALL:

Autism Society of British Columbia

(formerly Pacific Association for Autistic Citizens)

1584 Rand Avenue

Vancouver, B.C. V6P 3G2

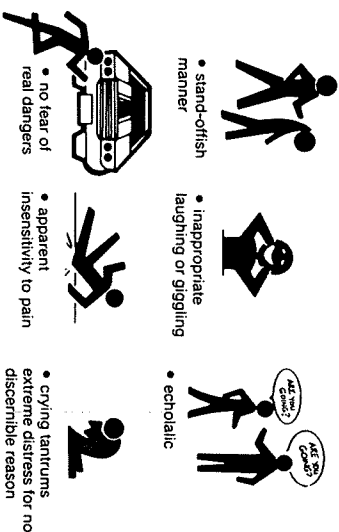
Telephone: (604) 261-8888

Fax: (604) 261-7898

Please make note of our new name, address and phone number.

This brochure was produced with funding from the Ministry of Social Services.

Autism is...



**A part of our world -
Not a world apart.**

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a lifelong disability of the central nervous system that affects social development, language development and is characterized by specific behaviours.

- In the first two years of life, the symptoms are often masked by developmental milestones.
- Symptoms vary from person to person and there is a wide spectrum of severity from mild to very severe.
- It occurs in approximately 15 out of every 10,000 births.
- Autism affects four times more males than females.

WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

At present, the cause of autism is still unknown. Some research suggests a physical problem affecting areas of the brain that process language and information coming in from the senses. Other research implies an imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain. Genetic factors and viral infections may sometimes be involved. Autism may indeed result from a combination of several causes.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTISM?

Although symptoms have been identified as characteristic of people with autism, not all people display all symptoms. Individuals display different combinations of these symptoms.

1. Severe Delays in Social Development

- Unresponsive to people
- Unresponsive to physical contact
- Little or no appropriate play with toys
- Little or no eye contact
- Prefers to be alone
- Inappropriate laughter and screaming
- Strong, inappropriate attachment to objects

2. Severe Communication Impairment

- Poor understanding of gestures
- Difficulties with abstract concepts
- Lacks comprehension of content and timing of conversation
- Focuses on one topic: *perseveration*
- Echoes what is said: *echolalia*
- Reverses pronouns

3. Atypical Behaviours

- Strong resistance to change in routine
- Self-stimulatory behaviour (rocking, hand flicking, spinning)
- Hyper or hypo sensitivity to sight, taste, smell, touch and hearing
- Unresponsive to words or sounds
- Distressed by certain sounds/noises
- Insensitive to pain
- Unresponsive to cold or heat
- Temper tantrums
- Self-injurious behaviour

4. Early Onset

- Autism occurs in infancy/childhood

5. Learning Deficits

- Difficulty relating learned skills from one environment to another (generalizing)
- Uneven learning patterns (poor skills in some areas, but exceptional abilities in others)

IS THERE A CURE?

Although there is no known cure at this time, worldwide research indicates the best treatment is early, intense intervention. A strong focus on increasing communication skills and promoting integrated education, gives people with autism an opportunity to grow to their fullest potential and be valued members of society.