

Fact Sheet

Autism Spectrum Disorder



What is Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

This is an umbrella description for a group of pervasive developmental disorders. There are three main types, which are diagnosed by specialists:

- Autism (Autistic Disorder)
- Asperger's (Asperger's Disorder/Syndrome)
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS which is sometimes referred to as atypical autism).

Children with ASD generally share difficulties in three main areas:

- social interaction
- communication
- behaviour/play (e.g. limited interests, preferring routines)

Many children with an ASD are under or over-sensitive to touch, pain, taste, smell, sounds or sights. They may also have an intellectual disability or other specific learning disabilities (see separate fact-sheets).

The word 'Spectrum' is used because children with these diagnoses share some difficulties, but their condition affects each child in different ways. Some children with ASD participate independently in everyday activities, while others will need ongoing special support.

About 1 in 160 children are thought to have an ASD. In New South Wales alone it is thought there are 9,000

children and young people with ASD. Boys are about 4 times more likely to have an ASD than girls.

What causes these disorders?

No one cause of ASD has been found - it is likely that many different things cause ASD. Recent studies suggest that some children with ASD have differences in their genes. We still have much to learn about ASD.

ASD:

- is not caused by how children are brought up or parented
- is not the 'fault' of the child with the condition.
- research shows that vaccines and food allergies do not cause ASD.

ASD is usually present from birth but it may be some time before the signs are recognisable. This is often around the age of 2 years, when children are learning to speak. About 30% of children with an ASD may show signs of loss of language at around this age.

What treatments are there?

It is important to make a diagnosis as early as possible as lots can be done to help a child with an ASD. As yet there is no known 'cure'. What we do know is that early intervention, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, special education and behavioural support makes a difference.

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These interventions can help develop a child's skills, reduce behaviour problems and help each child develop as much independence as possible. They can also help parents understand and support their child's development and skills.

Who should I contact for more information?

Parents usually know their child better than any one else and if you have any concern about your child's development or behaviour, it's a good idea to have your child seen early.

Your doctor or early childhood nurse would be a good person to talk to. Your family doctor can refer you to a Paediatrician or a specialist diagnostic and assessment service.

There are also specialist organisations that support families affected by ASD. **Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT)** has a helpful website www.aspect.org.au and information phone line 1800 069 978.

Other services that can be helpful include:

- Helping children with Autism Inquiry Line: 1800 289 177 www.fahcsia.gov.au
- Autism Advisor Program (NSW): 1300 978 611

- Raising Children Network, The Australian parenting website. Raising Children Network www.raisingchildren.net.au
- Early Childhood Intervention Australia : Information line : 1300 656 865 www.ecia.org.au
- Carer's NSW - phone: 9280 4744 www.carersnsw.asn.au
- Parent line – phone: 13 20 55, a 24 hour phone service run by qualified counsellors for parents of children between 0-18 years. Provides advice or information about appropriate referral services.

Remember:

- ASD affects about 1 in every 160 children.
- Children with ASD may have difficulties interacting and communicating with others, and with their play or behaviour.
- The earlier a child is diagnosed with an ASD and support is started the better the outcome for the child.
- See your doctor or early childhood nurse if you have concerns.
- Children with ASD are all unique, with different strengths and difficulties.
- Support is available.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for your child.

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