

### **What is autism?**

Autism is a neurobiological disorder of development that can cause information to be processed by an individual in different ways. This disorder can affect an individual's ability to understand and use language to communicate effectively with other people. It can affect an individual's ability to interact typically with objects or events in the environment and to respond typically to sensory stimuli. These difficulties manifest themselves in individuals on the spectrum from mild to severe.

### **What causes autism?**

Although we don't know exactly what causes autism, we do know that it is not caused by a lack of love or inadequate parenting skills. We do know that the symptoms of autism can be triggered by anything that affects the functioning of the central nervous system. We do know that autism research is being advanced due to the worldwide attention and recent increased funding. We hope with this that a cause and a cure will be found.

### **What is the occurrence of autism?**

Autism is not as rare as it once was. Now it is estimated that 1 in 150 children will be diagnosed with some form of autism spectrum disorder. It is on the rise in all parts of the world and across all races, social backgrounds, and cultures. Autism is four times more common in males.

### **How is autism diagnosed?**

Currently, there is no medical or psychological test that solely determines a diagnosis of autism. Diagnosis is based on a group of observed behavioral characteristics. No single behavior indicates autism nor will each individual demonstrate the same group of behaviors. A psychologist may use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition or DSM-IV to confirm a diagnosis of autism. An evaluation can be done in child-related centers connected with hospitals, universities, or private physician offices. Parent interviews and observations of the individual demonstrating the questioning behaviors should be a definite part of any valid evaluation.

### **What are the characteristics of autism?**

There are too many behavior characteristics to list here, but, here are a few:

- Rarely initiates communication
- Non-verbal
- Does not imitate gestures or sounds
- Echoes words and phrases
- Draws pictures in detail but might not be able to write letters

- Eye contact is non-existent or limited
- Would rather be alone
- Will use another's hand as a helping tool
- Flaps hands and/or flicks fingers in front of eyes
- Changes in daily routines is upsetting
- Will exhibit a strong interest in a certain subject
- Oversensitive to sound
- Avoids certain foods' textures or smells
- May demonstrate self-injurious behaviors like biting or hitting
- Toileting issues

Please remember that an individual under evaluation for autism will probably not demonstrate all of these behaviors and probably not just one. Also, if a parent has any concern about a child at any age, they should seek help. The earlier the diagnosis the better.

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