

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) fall under the broader category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) IV-TR. ASD is a term used to describe a set of neurological disorders, which include Autistic Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger's Disorder (Perry & Condillac, 2003). Every individual with ASD is unique. They differ by the type of characteristics they present with and the degree to which they are affected. ASD can affect individuals across all economic, racial and ethnic boundaries (Sicile-Kira, 2004). It is estimated that approximately 18 000 individuals between the ages of 0-19 have ASD in Ontario (Fombonne, 2003). Approximately 1 in 165 individuals are diagnosed with a PDD and the disorders are more prevalent in males. The cause or causes of ASD are still unknown (Szatmari, Zwaigenbaum & Bryson, 2004).

Autism Spectrum Disorder includes:

Autistic Disorder (often referred to as Autism)

- Characteristics usually appear before the age of three
- Significant difficulties in the areas of social interaction, communication and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped behaviours or interests

Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)

- Does not meet the criteria for Autistic Disorder or Asperger's Disorder
- Significant difficulties in the areas of social interaction associated with impairment in communication skills or the presence of restricted, repetitive and stereotyped behaviours or interests

Asperger's Disorder (often referred to as Asperger's Syndrome)

- No significant delay in language or cognitive development
- Significant difficulties in the areas of social interaction and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped behaviours (APA, 2000)

Common Characteristics of ASD:

Social Interaction – Children with ASD may have difficulty with:

- Non-verbal behaviours (e.g., eye gaze, facial expressions, body posture, gestures, etc.)
Developing and maintaining peer relationships
- Showing enjoyment/interests with others
Social and emotional reciprocity

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Common Characteristics of ASD:

Communication Skills – Children with ASD may have difficulty with:

- Using and/or understanding spoken language
- Initiating or maintaining conversation; or may engage in stereotyped and repetitive use of language
- Make believe and social imitative play

Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours – Children with ASD may have:

- Persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- Unusual interests
- Adherence to non-functional routines (e.g., may react to changes)
- Unusual motor mannerisms (e.g., hand flapping, rocking, etc.)

Impact on Daily Living:

Social Interaction Skills

- May have difficulty understanding what other people feel or think (theory of mind)
- May have difficulty understanding the “unspoken” rules of situations (hidden curriculum)
- May appear as though your child would rather be alone or that they have little interest in making friends
- May have difficulty interpreting social cues such as eye contact, smiles, facial expressions, and/or body language
- May lack spontaneous or imaginative play (prefer more concrete games)

Communication Skills

- May have limited or no verbal language (expressive)
- May have difficulty understanding language and/or following instructions (receptive)
May have difficulty expressing basic wants, needs, and feelings
- May have difficulty paying attention
- May need more time to process, organize and retrieve information
May have difficulty shifting attention from one activity to another

Restricted and Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour

- May engage in repetitive body movements (e.g., hand flapping, rocking, etc.)
- May have preoccupations with items or topics
- May insist on sameness and exhibit difficulties with changes in routine

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Impact on Daily Living Continued:

Social Interaction Skills

- May have difficulty understanding what other people feel or think (theory of mind)
- May have difficulty understanding the “unspoken” rules of situations (hidden curriculum)
- May appear as though your child would rather be alone or that they have little interest in making friends
- May have difficulty interpreting social cues such as eye contact, smiles, facial expressions, and/or body language
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Other Possible Areas of Difficulty

- Sensory: Sensory systems (i.e., smell, touch, taste, auditory, sight, proprioceptive and vestibular) may be hypersensitive (over sensitive) or hyposensitive (under sensitive)
- Anxiety: May experience anxiety in a variety of situations and for a number of different reasons (e.g., inability to cope with change, difficulty with communication, etc.)
- Motor functioning: May have difficulties with fine and gross motor activities (Stoddart, 2005)

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