

## Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD): Guide to Educators and Parents

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The autism spectrum disorders are more common in the pediatric population than are some better known disorders such as diabetes, spinal bifida, or Down syndrome.<sup>1</sup> Prevalence studies have been done in several states including United Kingdom, Europe, and Asia. Prevalence estimates range from two to six per 1,000 children. The wide range of prevalence points to a need for earlier and more accurate screening for the symptoms of ASD. The exact cause is unknown, but doctors think that there might be a genetic factor involved. All children with ASD demonstrate deficits in:

- Social interaction,
- verbal and nonverbal communication, and
- repetitive behaviors or interests.

In addition, they will often have unusual responses to sensory experiences, such as certain sounds or the way objects look. Each of these symptoms runs the gamut from mild to severe.<sup>2</sup> The way they make their presence felt is different in each individual child. Each child will display communication, social, and behavioral patterns that are individual but fit into the overall diagnosis of ASD.

This article provides a guide towards the management of this disorder which will help the educators and parent's. The first step is to find out the reason for a child's social and communication difficulties. General practitioner will be able to advise and to make a referral to local child psychiatrist or developmental pediatrician. An educational psychologist, speech therapist or occupational therapist's guidelines might also be needed. Making the correct diagnosis requires a detailed developmental history, medical and psychological reports, and assessment of the child's social and communication skills and intellectual abilities.

Some treatments include:

### 1. Special education

All children with autism need special education. This may be in a special school, or if symptoms are less severe, in a mainstream school with additional individual help. In general, autistic children do better if classroom activities are very structured.

### 2. Behavioral therapies

These may be provided by a clinical psychologist and can help a family cope with any behavioural problems associated with autism. Similar methods may be used at school where the child can be taught better ways to express themselves.

### 3. Medicines and other treatments

Sometimes medication is used to reduce specific symptoms. For example, certain drugs can be used in the short term to help relieve agitation, hyperactive behavior. However, these can have side-effects if used for a long time. There are various approaches available to help with communication, such as music therapy and picture symbols. However, there is only limited evidence that these treatments are effective. Some people claim that a hormone called secretin can help with the symptoms of autism. However, again there is no scientific evidence for this and the side-effects have not been investigated fully.

## Conclusion

Parents have a very important part to play in providing the love, understanding and consistency that their child needs. Many find that life at home goes more smoothly for everyone if they use similar strategies or approaches to those used by teachers or other professionals. The earlier the disorder is diagnosed, the sooner the child can be helped through treatment interventions. Pediatricians, family physicians, daycare providers, teachers, and parents may initially dismiss signs of ASD, optimistically thinking the child is just a little slow and will "catch up." Although early intervention has a dramatic impact

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on reducing symptoms and increasing a child's ability to grow and learn new skills, it is estimated that only 50 percent of children are diagnosed before kindergarten

### References

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