

Autism and Asperger's Syndrome

Children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) – which includes autism and Aspergers Syndrome – display a range of behaviours that can cause problems with learning and socialising. Medication, regular routines, social training and early intervention can help modify and manage these behaviours, but there is no cure.

People with ASD are like anybody else in that they have varying strengths and abilities. They can:

- have normal or above average intelligence and an extensive vocabulary – but have difficulty with the practical use of language
- be expert in their chosen field of interest – which can cause difficulty in social settings as they often fixate on one topic
- have an excellent factual memory for their chosen topic of interest
- be dedicated to their jobs in adult life when given the opportunity to work within their area of interest and have support in this environment
- perform well at school when given support and opportunities to learn.

What is Aspergers Syndrome?

Aspergers Syndrome is a developmental disorder that affects how the brain processes information. It affects a person's ability to communicate, interact with others and to control their emotions and behaviour. Aspergers is not a disease or illness – you can't catch it – and its effects often lessen as the child gets older and they learn various coping skills.

Aspergers is present at birth, but it is not usually until around 2 – 3 years of age that the behaviours and characteristics are first noticed. Often this is because certain milestones associated with language and social/emotional skills are not reached within the usual time frame.

Researchers and doctors are not clear on what causes Aspergers and autism. There are many theories, including that it is inherited – there seems to be a link between family members who have similar characteristics or behaviours. It affects about 10 times more boys than girls.

What are the characteristics of Aspergers Syndrome?

People with Aspergers might display some of the following characteristics (it's important to remember though that these attributes can also be present in children who don't have the syndrome). They often:

- prefer to play alone or with older children and adults
- have difficulty forming and maintaining friendships
- talk well, but have difficulty with communication
- have difficulty understanding that communication involves listening as well as talking
- take things too literally
- don't understand the rules of social
- behaviour, the feelings of others, or body language – eg they might not realise that someone who is frowning is cross
- have very rigid routine, rules and rituals that they insist all members of the family follow
- are sensitive to criticism
- have varying behaviour – from mildly unusual to aggressive and difficult (often because they are frustrated when things do not happen as they want them to)
- have narrow interests – they may focus on one thing and learn everything they can about it (eg they might develop an obsessive interest in cars or planes)
- are very talented in one to two areas and do well academically in certain subjects related to their 'talents'.

What is Autism?

Autism is thought to be a brain disorder affecting communication, behaviour and social interaction. A person with autism might have difficulties with some areas of their development while other areas can be unaffected.

Children with autism do not follow the typical patterns of child development. Some might show signs of 'something not quite right' at birth, while others will slip further and further behind children of the same age. Children with Autism between 18 and 36 months of age might suddenly reject people, act strangely and lose language skills they had already acquired. They have difficulty with their ability to communicate and interact socially with others – misunderstanding words, or interpreting them too literally, or not understanding at all. Without meaningful communication and language, they have problems letting

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Brought to you by YWCA NSW supporting people at critical times. Authored by Liz Connors, Early Childhood Specialist, YWCA NSW

Head Office

5-11 Wentworth Ave
Sydney NSW 2000
t 02 9285 6211
f 02 9283 2485
e info@ywcansw.com.au
www.ywcansw.com.au

Children's Services
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Autism and Asperger's Syndrome continued

people know what they want or need, which can result in screaming or grabbing.

People with autism usually have difficulty in understanding the emotions and actions of others, which makes it difficult to build friendships. Social interactions can be scary and confusing and so some people with autism might withdraw and become isolated, while others can try too hard to be sociable but never seem to get it right.

They often fixate on favourite topics, objects, places, people and activities, or develop highly structured routines and rituals to bring some order to the confusion and chaos they perceive around them. Any change to this routine can be very difficult for them to accept.

What are the signs of autism?

The Autism Association of NSW lists the following possible indicators of an Autism Spectrum Disorder: No single indicator necessarily signals autism – usually a child presents with several from some of the following categories.

Communication:

- does not respond to his/her name by 12 months of age
- does not point or wave by 12 months
- is not speaking by 18 months
- uses no spontaneous phrases by 24 months
- loses words previously used
- hears selectively – responds to certain sounds but ignores the human voice
- is unable to combine words to form meaningful sentences, uses only single words, repeats the same phrases no matter what the situation – eg 'Shut the door' when they want to go outside, or when they want a drink (they relate it to shutting the fridge door)
- only parrots what they hear (called echolalia)
- confuses pronouns (my, I, you) – eg when Ryan's teacher asks 'What is my name?' he answers 'My name is Ryan.'

Social skills:

- looks away when you speak to him/her
- does not return parent's smile
- lacks interest in other children
- often seems to be in his/her own world
- Is unable to follow simple instructions such as 'Give me your shoes.'

Behaviour:

- throws inexplicable tantrums
- self-injures (such as hand biting)
- has unusual interests or attachments
- has unusual motor movements – eg flaps arms, rocks body, walks on tiptoes
- Is overactive and uncooperative has difficulty coping with change.

Sensory:

- is afraid of some everyday sounds
- uses peripheral vision to look at objects
- eats a very limited range of foods
- is preoccupied with certain textures
- sounds, colours, smells and tastes.

Play:

- prefers to play alone
- has limited social play such as 'Peek-a-Boo'
- limits focus to certain toys
- plays with objects in unusual ways – eg repetitive spinning or lining them up.

Where can I find out more?

If you have any concerns about your child's development, speak to a health professional such as your Community Health nurse, GP or a paediatrician, who can arrange an Autism Assessment. For more information on autism or Asperger's Syndrome, see:

www.autismnsw.com.au – 'Could your young child be showing signs of Autism?'

www.pediatricneurology.com – 'Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Sorting it out'

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au – 'Autism' and 'Asperger's Syndrome' fact sheets.

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