

April is Autism Awareness Month

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities caused by a problem with the brain. Scientists do not know yet exactly what causes this problem. These disorders can impact a person's functioning at different levels, from very mildly to severely.

There is usually nothing about how a person with an autism spectrum disorder looks that sets them apart from other people, but they may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most people. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary – from gifted to severely challenged.

Autistic disorder is the most commonly known type in this group, but there are others, including “pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified” (PDD-NOS) and Asperger Syndrome.

A child or adult with an ASD might:

- have trouble relating to others or not have an interest in other people at all
- avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- prefer not to be held or cuddled or might cuddle only when they want to
- appear to be unaware when other people talk to them but respond to other sounds
- be very interested in people, but not know how to talk, play, or relate to them
- repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language
- have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions
- repeat actions over and over again
- have trouble adapting when a routine changes
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound
- lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words they were using)
- not play “pretend” games (pretend to “feed” a doll)
- not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over)
- not look at objects when another person points at them

Tips for families interacting with a child with autism:

- Find out about the interests of the child with autism, and ask him or her about them.
- When making plans, it's sometimes easier if you go to their house. Some children with autism are more comfortable in their own homes.
- Talk with the parents of the child with autism about the best way to explain or not explain the autistic child's diagnosis to your own child. Not all families tell the child with autism about his or her diagnosis.
- Keep in mind that every autistic child is different.

Adapted from the www.cdc.gov/autism and www.autismspeaks.org