

FACT SHEET

What is autism?

You may know somebody with a disability, for example someone who is deaf or blind or uses a wheelchair or who has learning difficulties. Autism is a special kind of disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. It is a very difficult disability to understand. Children and adults with autism look just like anyone else without the disability (although they may behave differently). You may have someone with autism in your class or school/college.

Children and adults with autism find it difficult to understand the world around them and sometimes get very upset, anxious or angry. They find it difficult to communicate with others in a meaningful way. Some people with autism, but by no means all, never learn to talk — they are non-verbal.

People with autism find it hard to make friends and have difficulty understanding how someone else feels. Whilst some people with autism have accompanying learning disabilities, others are of normal, or above normal, intelligence. Sometimes people with autism have normal or high intelligence (also known as high functioning autism) are said to have Asperger syndrome (which is named after the doctor who first described it).

Often people are said to be on the 'autistic spectrum'. 'Spectrum' means range. The autistic spectrum therefore covers the whole range of people with autism from the person who has the disability in its severest form and never learns to speak to the person with Asperger syndrome. Being on the autistic spectrum also means that people with autism will have different characteristics and no two individuals will be alike.

Autism: An Information Sheet for Secondary School and College Students

The word 'autism' comes from 'autos', the Greek word for self. A child with autism is often referred to as someone who lives in a world of his or her own.

The Triad of Impairments

The three main characteristics of autism have been described as a 'triad of impairments'. (Triad of impairments means 'three areas of difficulty'.) They are:-

- **Social interaction** - difficulty with social relationships (e.g. making friends)
- **Social communication** - difficulty with verbal communication (talking) and non-verbal communication (e.g. understanding that you are smiling because you are happy or pleased)
- **Imagination** - difficulty playing games and imagining (e.g. rather than play a racing game with toy cars, a child with autism may spend many hours simply spinning the wheels of an up-turned car).

In addition to this triad, many people with autism share common behaviours such as an insistence on always going the same way to school or the shops, or obsessions with certain objects or things such as dinosaurs or trains. Other characteristics can be seen on the pin men pictures attached to this factsheet.

How many people have autism?

This is a difficult question to answer because there is no national register of people with autism in the UK. We think that there are nearly 1 in 110 people who have an autistic spectrum disorder (including Asperger syndrome). More boys are affected than girls but we are uncertain as to why this is.

What causes autism?

This is another difficult question to answer because we do not really know the exact cause or causes of autism. It is thought that autism is probably caused by an injury to the brain before, during or after birth. There is a lot of research being carried out to try and discover which parts of the brain are affected and what caused the damage.

There is also some evidence that autism is a genetic disorder i.e. it runs in families. (This does not mean that relatives of people with autism will necessarily also have autism. For example, you or one of your friends may have a brother or sister with autism, but you or your friend may not be affected.)

What we do know is that autism is not caused by a person's upbringing. Also, remember it does not necessarily mean that a person with autism is not intelligent. While some people with autism do have learning difficulties, some are of average or above average intelligence.

How do you know when someone has autism?

Sometimes, if you are unwell and go to see the doctor, s/he will do tests, such as a blood test, to find out what is wrong with you. At present, it is not possible to test in this way for autism, although research is being carried out all the time to discover such a test. Instead, a paediatrician (a children's doctor) or another qualified health professional will carry out an assessment. This assessment may include observing the child in the clinic, at home or in school/nursery; intelligence and language tests; and taking a detailed history of the child's development from her/his parents.

The earlier a child gets a diagnosis, the better, because this means they can have access to the right kind of help. However, some people are not diagnosed until they reach their teens or even adulthood.

Can autism be cured?

Autism is a life-long disability. This means that a child with autism will grow up to be an adult with autism. However, some children with autism, if given the right help at the right time, grow up to be independent adults e.g. have their own home, get married, get a job. Others will need to be cared for all their life. However, the earlier a child receives help the better the outcome.

How can people with autism be helped?

Although there is no cure for autism, there are many ways in which children with autism can be helped.

- **Diet:** For some children a special diet, such as eating no grain, wheat or dairy products, can help. Such children may be helped by going on what is known as a gluten (grain or wheat) and/or casein (dairy) free diet. You may have seen some food packets marked as gluten or casein free. For others, taking vitamins, such as Vitamin B6 and magnesium, is beneficial.
- **Drugs:** There is no drug that can cure autism. However, drugs can be used to help problems such as sleeping difficulties, hyperactive behaviour etc.
- **Education:** This is one of the best ways of helping children with autism and there are a number of methods of teaching that can help. Some children attend special schools where teachers are specially trained in teaching children with autism, whereas other children attend mainstream (regular) schools. Children who do attend mainstream school may have someone with them to help them during the school day. They respond best in a classroom where there is an understanding of the characteristics of autism e.g. a need for structure and as few changes as possible to the school day.

One of the most commonly used educational approaches is known as behaviour modification. This can be used both at home and at school/nursery/college and, at its simplest, involves rewarding a person for positive behaviour, thus encouraging them to do it again.

One of the best known behavioural approaches is called Lovaas (named after the doctor who developed it). Lovaas involves one adult working with a young child for long periods of time and teaching basic social, educational and daily life skills.

Other approaches used in the UK include TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autism and related Communication Handicapped Children) and SPELL (Structure, Positive, Empathic, Low arousal, Links).

- **Communication skills:** Not all children with autism learn to speak, or they can only speak one or two words. It is therefore important to teach alternative forms of communication. This is vital if the child is able to indicate their needs, e.g. to ask for a drink or something to eat.

One method that is increasingly being used is the Picture Exchange Communication System, or PECS for short. This involves the child showing or pointing to a card with a picture. For example, if the child is thirsty, they can point to a picture of a cup. Gradually the child learns to build up a sentence from cards e.g. I want a drink. Alongside this, some children also learn to ask for what they want verbally.

What is important to recognise is that all people with autism are different and what works with one person, may not work with another.

Can adults with autism have a job or their own family?

Some people with autism, especially those with learning difficulties, will need care and support all their lives and may live in a residential home. Others live fairly independent lives, for example, go to university, have a job, get married, have children.

Some will need a degree of support throughout their lives. There are, for example, supported employment

schemes which help people with autism to get a job, explain to the employers about autism and support the person in their work. Other agencies that may be involved include Social Services, the local Health Service etc. Counsellors may be able to help people with autism manage their anxiety or depression or deal with the impact that their disability has on their lives.

Resources

WEBSITES

By young people for young people

<http://tqjunior.thinkquest.org/5852/autism.htm>

<http://www8.bcity.com/autwebcenter777/>

<http://kidsautism.cjb.net/>

<http://expage.com/page/autismplanet>

For young people

<http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/aut.html>

http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/autism.html

By young people with autism

<http://www.witwicki.freemove.co.uk/index.html>

<http://www.ccis.org.uk/users/Gareth/>

<http://www.actionasd.org.uk/LAPTOP%20LOTTERY.htm>

National Autistic Society

<http://www.nas.org.uk>

BOOKS ABOUT AUTISM

Wing L. (1996) The Autistic Spectrum: a guide for parents and professionals

Published by Constable

ISBN: 0094751609

Available from NAS Publications Department

NOVELS ABOUT AUTISM

Jarman J. (1999) Hangman
Published by Anderson Press
ISBN: 0862648661

Rees C. (2000) Truth or Dare
Published by Macmillan Children's Books
ISBN: 0333729528

Rodowsky C. (2001) Clay
Published by Farrar Staus Giroux
ISBN: 0374313385

VIDEOS

Rain Man
Published by Warner Home Video

The Ages of Autism
Published by Mark-It Television Associates in
association with The National Autistic Society.
Available from NAS Publications Department

By Christine Deudney

If item marked available from the NAS please contact:

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Helpline (if you are worried about a friend or relative):
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If you require further information on approaches to autism please
contact the Information Centre.

The NAS Information Centre produces fact sheets on a wide
variety of topics and can provide customised reference lists in
response to individual requests. The lists are extracted from our
database which contains over 11,000 books and articles from the
autism field. This service is particularly useful for those wanting to
research a specific subject thoroughly.

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November 2000
Updated: January 2002