



Tip Sheets

What is Autism?



Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder usually recognized in the first three years of life. The Center for Disease Control estimates that 1 in 110 children born in the U.S. are on the autism spectrum. Boys are four

times more likely to have autism than girls. Autism is the second most common developmental disorder and it is considered to be a national public health crisis.

Autism as a Spectrum Disorder

Autism is part of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) because the symptoms of autism can range from mild to severe. Autism Spectrum Disorders/Pervasive Developmental Disorders include:

- Autistic Disorder
- Asperger's Disorder
- Rett's Disorder
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified.

Affected Areas of Development

- The way a child communicates, understands, and uses language.
- Social skills, how the child interacts socially with others.
- Sensory/Behavioral, how the child understands and responds to his/her environment and the world around him/her.

Characteristics of Autism

- Challenges relating to people, objects, and events including challenges in social skills and relationships.
- Sustained repetitive and abnormal play (hyperfocus on objects or topics).
- Speech and language absence, delay, or abnormality.

Challenges Relating to People, Objects, and Events

- Over attachment to certain objects
- May not seek cuddling or physical attention
- Difficulty with imitation skills
- Difficulty with reciprocal social interaction
- Absent or abnormal social play
- Difficulty interacting with other children
- Preference for being alone
- Aloof manner
- Difficulty expressing needs
- Uses gestures or pointing instead of words
- Difficulty making and keeping friends

Sustained Repetitive and Abnormal Play

- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Unresponsive to verbal cues
- Little or no eye contact
- Insistence on sameness, resistance to change in routine
- Noticeable physical over-activity or under-activity
- Displays extreme distress for no apparent reason

Speech and Language Absence or Delays

- Inappropriate laughing and giggling
- Echolalia (repeating words or phrases in place of normal language), unusual use of speech
- Abnormalities in nonverbal communication, as in eye contact, facial expressions, body postures, gestures to initiate social interaction
- Abnormalities in production of speech (volume, pitch, stress, rhythm, pacing)
- Abnormalities in sound of speech (monotone, high pitch, inflection)

Strategies for Meeting

Sensory/Behavioral Needs

- Keep loud sounds to a minimum; many children have strong reactions to noise.
- Be aware of visual distractions and environmental distractions as in bright lights, buzzing fluorescent lights, etc.
- Provide earphones or other methods to muffle out sounds.
- Incorporate raised letters, pictures, and other sensory input to help children feel what is being taught or told.
- Use structure and routine.
- Seek the function of behavior and use positive supports.
- Ensure opportunities for getting away from sensory overload.
- Provide a rich sensory environment, but never force an experience.
- Organize the environment with visual cues like picture schedules, prompts, and visual cues.
- If a child has visual processing issues, use black print on colored paper to minimize contrast. Avoid bright yellow.
- Incorporate relaxation techniques and massage (check with parent/therapist).

Strategies for Supporting Social Skills

- Plan and organize transitions between settings or events. Talk about transitions ahead of time to avoid problems.

- May benefit a child to have a low teacher/child ratio.
- Practice taking another person's perspective (role plays, dramatic play).
- Support the child in entering a play situation, get them going and monitor when further support may be needed, but allow for independence when appropriate.
- Offer Social Stories® and Social Scripts® for play scenarios, transitions, new events, etc.
- Occasionally provide opportunities for quiet time or individual activities. Watch for over-scheduling with peers.
- Use repetition to teach social skills.
- New learning done in small steps.

Strategies for Meeting

Communication/Language Needs

- You may need to try alternative communication strategies as directed by therapists or special educators.
- Use picture/story boards, visual schedules/calendars, prompts are very effective.
- Repetition is important!
- Label everything you can in the environment with pictures **and** words.
- Encourage children to express themselves through art, computer programming, and other venues.
- Use a child's fixations to teach from.
- Use concrete visual methods to teach numbers.
- Help child sing words instead of speak.

For more information on autism spectrum disorders, visit

www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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