

WHAT IS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a disorder of brain development in which a child experiences difficulty with social interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication and repetitive behaviors.

The word “spectrum” refers to the wide range of symptoms and levels of difficulty with life and social skills that a child with ASD may have. Some may be mildly impaired, while others may have significant challenges. The causes of autism spectrum disorder are unknown, but research is being done to understand more about this complicated, lifelong condition.

Parenting a child with autism can be challenging. It is essential for you as a parent to understand the diagnosis in order to assist your child in coping with his or her autism. It is also important that you make time to care for yourself.

Parental Supports/Resources

Parent’s Resource Network Line

866.815.8122

Using this toll-free number, created by the Parent/Professional Advocacy League, you can obtain support and get information on mental health services for children.

Parent Advocacy League (PAL)

ppal.net

PAL provides support, education, and advocacy around issues related to children’s mental health.

Massachusetts Advocates for Children Autism Special Education Legal Support Center

617.357.8431, extension 234 | massadvocates.org

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Here are some resources that are available if you feel that you need some help.

Additional Resources

National Institute of Mental Health

nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml

The National Institute of Mental Health Web site on autism provides a detailed booklet that describes autism and information on coping with the diagnosis. The information is available to download.

Autism Society

800.3.AUTISM or 781.237.0272 (Massachusetts chapter)
autism-society.org

The Autism Society of America is the leading voice and resource of the autism community in education, advocacy, services, research, and support.

Autism Resources

autism-resources.com

This Web site offers information and links regarding the developmental disabilities of autism and Asperger’s syndrome.

Autism Link

autismlink.com

The site seeks to help parents of autistic children by providing opportunities for support, inclusion, and information free of charge.

Child Development Institute

childdevelopmentinfo.com/disorders/autism_fact_sheet.shtml

Fact sheets and various information and resources on autism are available.

healthychildren.org

Sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Provides valuable information on a variety of children’s health topics.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health; United States Department of Education

For more information and/or referrals for treatment, go to tuftshealthplan.com or call Member Services at the number on your Tufts Health Plan member ID card.

Your child’s pediatrician can also be a helpful resource.

Behavioral Health

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS



INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER INCLUDE:

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics
National Institute of Mental Health

The child:

- ▶ Coos and babbles in first year of life, but then stops doing so
- ▶ Makes little eye contact and does not seem to smile
- ▶ Fails or is slow to respond to their own name or other attempts to get their attention
- ▶ Develops language at a very slow pace or speaks only in single words, repeating certain phrases over and over, seeming unable to make meaningful sentences
- ▶ Has repetitive motions or unusual behaviors
- ▶ Does not seem to know how to play with toys
- ▶ Uninterested in making friends

If you have concerns about these or any other behaviors, please discuss them with your child's pediatrician.

DIAGNOSIS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

The diagnosis of ASD is made through observation of a child's communication, behavior, and developmental milestones by yourself and a team of teachers, doctors and other professionals involved with your child.

While your child is being evaluated, it may be helpful to keep a notebook or log of all the information you gather.

HELPING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AFFECTED BY AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

There is no single best way of helping all children with ASD, however many children with ASD respond well to highly structured, specialized social, educational and behavior management programs.

Early Intervention (EI) Programs

If autism spectrum disorder is suspected your child will need a complete evaluation and should be referred to an early intervention program. Early intervention programs are for children 0 – 3 years of age and are run by the state in which you live. Specialists can evaluate your child to see if they are appropriate for the program.

EI works with children who show a delay in cognitive, social, or communication skills. Children may also have a delay in physical or motor abilities or self-care skills. Once a child is enrolled in the program, further evaluations and testing can be done to determine what services would be most helpful for your child. Specialists include teachers, speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, behavior analysts and other professionals. Services may be provided in your home or in the community. Your child's pediatrician can refer you to a program.

It is important to start services as soon as your child has been diagnosed with ASD. It has been shown that intensive behavioral therapy can significantly improve a child's cognitive and language skills.

One type of treatment is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) which can shape and encourage new positive behaviors while reducing problem behaviors.

Parent involvement and training should also be a strong component of any program in which your child is involved.

It is very important that all healthcare providers work closely with one another and with the family to achieve the most positive outcomes. Ongoing communication with your child's treatment team is important.

There is no medication specifically to treat ASD. However, medication may be prescribed to help with other problems that frequently affect children with ASD, such as aggression, self-injurious behaviors or temper tantrums.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics; National Institute of Mental Health