

Developmental Disorders

Neurodevelopmental Disorders

(including Autism Spectrum Disorder)

What are Neurodevelopmental Disorders?

The neurodevelopmental disorders are a group of conditions that usually appear early in a child's life and are associated with developmental deficits in personal, social, academic, or occupational functioning. The range of developmental problems varies from very specific limitations of learning to global impairments of social skills or intelligence. We address some of the neurodevelopmental disorders on this page.

With the recent revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (a compendium of diagnoses), the category Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was introduced to reflect current science and understanding of this disorders. ASD replaces the categories of autistic disorder (autism), Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by problems with communication skills, social interactions and repetitive and/or stereotyped behaviors. Individuals with ASD must show symptoms from early childhood, even if those symptoms are not recognized until later. Four times as many boys as girls are diagnosed with ASD (National Institute of Mental Health).

People formerly diagnosed with Autistic Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome would now be considered to have some degree of Autism Spectrum Disorder. The term "spectrum" refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills, and levels of impairment or disability that children with ASD can have. Some children are mildly impaired by their symptoms, while others are severely impacted. Information about this change can be found [here](#).

Most children with ASD have problems with social skills, communication skills, and with repetitive behaviors. While each child's specific pattern of behavior is different, behaviors often demonstrated by these children include:

Problems with social interactions

- Difficulty making eye contact or using facial expressions to interact with others
- Failure to develop peer relationships which are age-appropriate

Source: <http://www.mhawestchester.org/content/developmental-disorders>

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- Not seeking to share interests or activities with others

Problems with communication

- Delay or complete lack of spoken language
- Difficulty initiating or sustaining conversation (those who have spoken language)
- Use of language repetitively or in a stereotyped pattern
- Lack of make-believe play

Abnormal behavior patterns:

- Preoccupation with one interest that is abnormal in intensity or focus
- Strict adherence to certain routines or rituals
- Repetitive motor movements (e.g. hand or finger flapping)

What causes Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Currently, there is no single known cause of Autism Spectrum Disorders. Yet, many research studies have found that there is a link between Autism and certain genes. Studies have shown that children who have a sibling with ASD have a higher rate than those who do not have a sibling with ASD (National Institute of Mental Health).

The question of whether environmental factors play a role in the development of ASD has been highlighted in the media and has also been researched. There has been significant media focus on whether exposure to thimerosal, the mercury based preservative which previously was commonly used in the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, increases the likelihood of developing ASD. While the discussion is ongoing, so far, research has not shown a causal relationship between thimerosal and ASD.

Other research has looked at how children with ASD process information. Studies show that there are differences in brain functioning and in the ways that children with ASD process information, compared to children who do not have ASD. The significance of these differences is still being researched.

How can Autism Spectrum Disorders be Treated?

There is currently no cure for Autism Spectrum Disorder. Yet, many treatments are available and can be beneficial. The best treatments for a specific child are determined by the treating professionals and family working together.

The most commonly used treatment is behavior therapy. This type of therapy seeks to help children with ASD adapt and interact with their environment (such as assisting them in everyday tasks and functions, e.g. sitting quietly at the table and asking for a glass of juice).

Currently, there are no medications for the treatment of ASD. However, medications may be used to alleviate symptoms and improve a child's functioning by helping a child focus and to relieve anxiety.

Additional Information about Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Speaks

<http://www.autismspeaks.org/>

Autism Speaks is an autism science and advocacy organization, dedicated to funding research into the causes, prevention, treatments and a cure for autism; increasing awareness of autism spectrum disorders; and advocating for the needs of individuals with autism and their families.

Families for Early Autism Treatment (FEAT)

<http://www.feat.org>

Families for Early Autism Treatment (FEAT) is a non-profit organization designed to support families with children diagnosed with ASD. It provides a network for families and resources include a newsletter, lending library and parent resource meetings. There is no New York State division, but there is one in Connecticut.

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>

NIMH is an agency of the United States government. This site has clear information about mental health conditions and provides information on how individuals and family members can recognize symptoms and get the help they need.

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