

Autism

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction, communication and imagination skills. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. One should keep in mind however, that autism is a spectrum disorder and it affects each individual differently and at varying degrees.

In addition to problems with social interaction, imagination and communication, children with autism also have a limited range of interests. Many children with autism (nearly 75%) also have mental retardation. In many cases, children with autism are unable to emotionally bond with their parents or other family members.

Symptoms of autism

Symptoms typically appear before the child is 3 years old and last throughout life. Children with autism can display a wide range of symptoms, which can vary in severity from mild to disabling. General symptoms that may be present to some degree in a child with autism include:

- ☒ Difficulty with verbal communication, including problems using and understanding language
- ☒ Inability to participate in a conversation, even when the child has the ability to speak
- ☒ Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- ☒ Difficulty with non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions
- ☒ Difficulty in mixing with others, including relating to people and to his or her surroundings
- ☒ Inability to make friends and preferring to play alone
- ☒ Unusual ways of playing with toys and other objects, such as only lining them up a certain way
- ☒ Lack of imagination
- ☒ Difficulty adjusting to changes in routine or familiar surroundings, or an unreasonable insistence on following routines in detail
- ☒ Repetitive body movements or patterns of behavior, such as hand flapping, spinning and head banging
- ☒ Preoccupation and obsession with unusual objects or parts of objects
- ☒ Have no real fears of danger

- ☒ People with a form of autism, called savantism, have exceptional skills in specific areas such as music, art and numbers. People with savantism are able to perform these skills without lessons or practice.

What are the warning signs that a child may have autism?

Babies develop at their own pace, some more quickly than others. However, you should consider an evaluation for autism if any of the following apply:

- ☒ Your child does not babble or coo by 12 months of age.
- ☒ Your child does not gesture, such as point or wave, by 12 months of age.
- ☒ Your child does not say single words by 16 months.
- ☒ Your child does not say two-word phrases on his or her own (rather than just repeating what someone else says) by 24 months.
- ☒ Your child has lost any language or social skills (at any age).

Causes of autism

The exact cause of autism is not known, but research has pointed to several possible factors, including genetics (heredity), certain types of infections and problems occurring at birth.

Diagnoses

If symptoms are present, the doctor will begin an evaluation by performing a complete medical history and physical examination. Although there are no laboratory tests that diagnose autism, the doctor may use various tests -- such as X-rays and blood tests -- to determine if there is a physical disorder causing the symptoms. If no physical disorder is found, the child may be referred to a specialist in childhood development disorders, such as a child and adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist, pediatric neurologist, developmental pediatrician, or another health professional who is specially trained to diagnose and treat autism. The doctor bases his or her diagnosis on the child's level of development, and the doctor's observation of the child's speech and behavior, including his or her play and ability to socialize with others. The doctor often seeks input from the child's parents, teachers and other adults who are familiar with the child's symptoms.

Treatment

There currently is no cure for autism, but treatment may allow for relatively normal development in the child and reduce undesirable behaviors. Children with autism generally benefit most from a highly structured environment and

use of routines. Treatment for autism may include a combination of the following:

- ☒ Special education: Education is structured to meet the child's unique educational needs.
- ☒ Behavior modification: This includes strategies for supporting positive behavior and decreasing problem behavior by the child.
- ☒ Speech, physical or occupational therapy: These therapies are designed to increase the child's functional abilities.
- ☒ Medication: There are no medications currently approved to treat autism, but medications may be used to treat specific symptoms, such as anxiety (nervousness), hyperactivity and behavior that may result in injury.

Prognosis for people with autism

The prognosis varies depending on the severity of symptoms, the age at which treatment is started and the availability of supportive resources for the child. Symptoms in many children improve with intervention or as the children age. Some people with autism are able to lead normal or near-normal lives. However, about 75% of children with autism do not develop enough functional and communication skills to live independently as adults. The prognosis is better for children with higher levels of intelligence who are able to communicate with language.

Prevention

Autism cannot be prevented or cured. However, early diagnosis and intervention is critical and may help to maximize a child with autism's ability to speak, learn and function. It is very important that all children see a pediatrician regularly so that any signs of autism can be detected early. The earlier treatment is started, the more effective it can be.