

FACTSHEET

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Autism spectrum disorder

What is the Autism Spectrum?

The Autism spectrum, also known as autism, is a developmental disability. It affects the way children communicate and interact with other people. They also often have repetitive behaviours or restricted interests as well as sensory differences. Some children with autism also have intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties (see separate factsheets) although others can have cognitive skills in the average or above average range.

The word 'spectrum' is used because children with this diagnosis share some difficulties. However, autism may affect each child in different ways. Some children with autism participate independently in everyday activities, while others will need ongoing support.

About 1 in 160 children are thought to have have autism, although recent research suggests that it may be as many as 1 in 110 children. Boys are about four times more likely to have autism than girls.

What causes these disorders?

No one cause of autism has been found - it is likely that many different things cause autism. Recent studies suggest that some children with autism have differences in their genes. We still have much to learn.

Autism:

- is not caused by how children are brought up or parented
- is not the 'fault' of the child with the condition
- research shows that vaccines and food allergies do not cause autism

Autism is usually present from birth but it may be some time before the signs are recognisable. This is often around the age of 2 years, when children are learning to speak. About 30% of children with autism may show signs of loss of language at around this age.

What treatments are there?

It is important to make a diagnosis as early as possible to help a child with autism. As yet there is no known 'cure'. What we do know is that early intervention, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, special education and behavioural support makes a difference. Early intervention can help develop a child's skills, reduce behaviour problems and help each child develop as much independence as possible. Parent involvement in early intervention therapy can help parents understand and support their child's development and skills.

Who should I contact for more information?

Parents usually know their child better than anyone else and if you have any concern about your child's development or behaviour, it's a good idea to have your child seen early.

Your doctor or early childhood nurse would be a good person to talk to. Your family doctor can refer you to a Paediatrician or a specialist diagnostic and assessment service.

There are also specialist organisations that support families affected by autism. Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) has a helpful website www.autismspectrum.org.au.

Other services that can be helpful include:

- Autism Advisor Program (NSW): 1300 978 611, website www.autismspectrum.org.au/aap
- Raising Children Network, The Australian parenting website: www.raisingchildren.net.au
- The Positive Partnerships website: www.positivepartnerships.com.au
- Carer's NSW - phone: 9280 4744 www.carersnsw.org.au
- Parent line - phone: 13 20 55, a 24 hour phone service run by qualified counsellors for parents of children between 0-18 years. Provides advice or information about appropriate referral services.

Remember:

- Autism affects about 1 in every 160 children.
- Children with autism may have difficulties interacting and communicating with others, and with their play or behaviour.
- The earlier a child is diagnosed with autism, and support is started, the better the outcome for the child.
- See your doctor or early childhood nurse if you have concerns.
- Children with autism are all unique, with different strengths and difficulties.
- Support is available.