



## **Common Signs of Autism**

There are three distinctive behaviors that characterize autism:

- Autistic individuals have difficulties with social interaction
- Problems with verbal and nonverbal communication
- Repetitive behaviors or narrow, obsessive interests

These behaviors can range in impact from mild to disabling. The hallmark feature of autism is impaired social interaction.

Parents are usually the first to notice symptoms of autism in their child. As early as infancy, a baby with autism may be unresponsive to people or focus intently on one item to the exclusion of others for long periods of time. Children with autism may fail to respond to their name, often avoid eye contact with other people and don't know how to play interactively with other children.

Individuals with autism also have difficulty interpreting what others are thinking or feeling because they can't understand social cues, such as tone of voice or facial expressions, and don't watch other people's faces for clues about appropriate behavior.

They may repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language (echolalia).

Many individuals with autism engage in repetitive movements such as rocking, twirling or finger flicking, or in self-abusive behavior such as biting or head-banging. Some speak in a sing-song voice about a narrow range of favorite topics, with little regard for the interests of the person to whom they are speaking. They often repeat actions over and over again, and have trouble adapting when a routine changes.

Most people with autism also share delays in fine and gross motor skills.

## **What is "High Functioning Autism" and how is that different from Asperger's Disorder?**

"High functioning autism" is not an official diagnostic term, though it is sometimes used as such. It tends to describe people who have many or all of the symptoms of autism, and did not develop language typically. These higher functioning individuals are sometimes diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Delay, Not Otherwise Specified when they exhibit some, but not all of the classic autistic characteristics.

Asperger's syndrome is a much more specific diagnosis, with specific criteria. The biggest difference between Asperger's syndrome and high functioning autism is usually based on whether a person developed speech typically as a toddler. Those who did develop speech typically were considered to have Asperger's syndrome while those who did not (even if they developed typical speech later) were diagnosed with autism. Both people with high functioning autism and Asperger's syndrome are affected by the impairments common to all people with autism.

Autism symptoms fall along a spectrum of symptoms from classic autistic individuals who are usually non-verbal, unengaged, and unable to perform well on standard diagnostic tests, (and thus labeled Mentally Retarded) to individuals who are able to function well in academic and work settings, but demonstrate autistic behaviors around social interactions and mannerisms.

What all individuals diagnosed on the autism spectrum have in common are delays or disabilities when it comes to social skills such as ordinary conversation, eye contact and emotional understanding of others. These issues are likely to lead to impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and unusual, repetitive, or severely limited activities and interests.

Both groups are likely to be of average or above average intelligence and the fundamental presentation of the two conditions is largely the same. This means that treatments, therapies and educational approaches should also be largely similar.

At the same time, all people with autism or Asperger's syndrome are unique and have their own special skills and abilities. These abilities deserve as much recognition as the areas they have difficulty in.

Autistic people are unlikely to be the life of the party, though they may well be quite talented in such areas as engineering, technology and music. It's important to know that stereotypes of autistic people as "idiot savants" (such as the character presented by Dustin Hoffman in the movie "Rain Man") may represent a few unusual individuals, but these are by no means typical of all people on the autism spectrum.