

## What is Autism?

There is a lot of information available about autism. In this article I will try to give a brief overview. Autism is brain disorder with a range of developmental problems usually appearing before 3 years of age. The main developmental problems noted at this age is lack of social and communication interactions which can be verbal or non verbal. Autism didn't have a name till the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was identified by Dr Leo Kanner in 1943. According to The Mayo Clinic, it is estimated that 3 to 6 of every 1000 children have autism, with it being more prevalent in boys. It is also believed by researchers that the increase in rate of today's diagnosis is attributed to improved diagnostic criteria and early diagnosis by physicians. It also should be noted that according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 20 to 30 percent of children that have autism will develop epilepsy by adulthood.

A child with autism can start to develop normally only to notice that the child may decline in skills, such as social, behavior or language that may be verbal or non verbal. There are three areas to monitor a decline of skills in a child that signal a concern for further investigation. (These lists are not inclusive.)

### 1. Social

- A child that fails to respond to his/her name.
- A child that doesn't respond when you talk to them.
- A child that cannot keep good eye contact.
- A child that doesn't like to be cuddled.
- A child who likes to play alone all the time.
- A child who has trouble with interpretation of others feelings or trouble playing interactively with other children.
- A child who has a preoccupation to things.

### 2. Educational/Behavior

- A child who is constantly active doing things.

- A child who is sensitive to light, touch or noise.
- A child who responds well to only organized routines and cries when routine are not followed.
- A child who shows (repetitive behaviors) ie, rocking.
- A child who displays obsessive behaviors.
- A child who displays self abusive behavior, like head banging.
- A child that displays a reduction to pain response.

### 3. Language

- A child who usually can't start a conversation easily.
- A child who loses an acquired ability to say words.
- A child that displays speech is like a robot, or has a sing song, abnormal speech pattern.

The majority of children with autism shows normal to high intelligence and can learn to live independently.

There is no single cause for autism. Research has found that children with autism have abnormal levels of serotonin and neuro transmitters with in the brain. Heredity can also play a role in transmission of the disorder. Research shows that if a family has one child with autism then there is a 1 in 20 chance of having a second child with the disorder. Although not a cause, but a myth; it should be noted that vaccines do NOT cause autism. Research has failed to provide any evidence of this happening, including research of MMR vaccine. When looking at the MMR and autism connection, you should be also aware that autism starts to be noticeable around the same time the MMR vaccine is scheduled to be given to a child, so naturally you would think that there is a correlation, but again, there is not.

It you believe your child to have some developmental delays, seek the advice of your physician or bring concerns to their attention during a check up. Diagnosis is usually made by observation and from the history provided by the care giver of the child

concerning the behaviors listed above. Keep in mind that a firm diagnosis may not be actually made till the child is 2 or 3 years of age.

There are no single treatments for autism. A drug therapy may be prescribed only to help with the symptoms. If your child needs instruction on how to act and communicate, then structured behavior therapy will be helpful. Another approach that can be very useful with the autistic child is the complementary approach which involves art, music, sensory vitamins and minerals.

If you have a child with autism, there are various ways to cope with the situation. It would be beneficial to join a support group. In coping with a child with autism, you must take very good care of yourself physically and mentally. Allow time for yourself along with getting plenty of rest and good nutrition. Following good coping skills, tailored to you, will help you to deal with your child's needs. Be sure to educate yourself about the professionals who are seeing your child along with researching and understanding the disorder. If you have questions, be sure to discuss them with your physician and even your child's teacher.

As always, if you have any questions or comments, please eMail me at [gheffelmire@dearborncounty.in.gov](mailto:gheffelmire@dearborncounty.in.gov)