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CENTER FOR AUTISM AND RELATED DISABILITIES



FACT SHEET – AUTISM

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurological disability that affects a person's ability to communicate, understand language, play and socially interact with others. The first signs of autism usually appear as developmental delays before age three.

Autism is classified as a developmental disability because it interferes with the typical rate and patterns of childhood development.

There are diagnoses closely related to autism such as PDD-NOS (pervasive-development disorder not otherwise specified), Asperger's syndrome, and Rett's syndrome that are included in the category of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Characteristics

Every person with autism is different. However, there are some common characteristics of individuals with autism that may occur.

Remember that although these are some common characteristics no two persons with autism experience the world or behave in the same way.

- Difficulty in using and understanding language. Some children develop typical speech patterns until age two.
- Poorly developed social skills and unusual play with toys.
- Over or under sensitivity to sound, sight, taste, touch, or smell.
- Repetitive behaviors such as spinning objects or rocking.
- Certain behaviors exhibited to stimulate the senses, such as switching a light on and off repeatedly, or humming loudly.
- Difficulty with changes to surroundings or routines.
- Very high levels of activity for long periods of time.
- Uneven skill development. Some skills are normal or superior for their age while others show significant delay.
- Challenging behaviors such as aggression, self-injury or severe withdrawal.

Causes

Nobody knows what causes autism. Some scientists believe there is a biological cause that affects the working of the brain, but this has not been proven. It is possible there are many factors that could interact with one another which could cause different characteristics in each individual with autism.

Parents do not cause autism. No factors in a child's experiences or in parenting styles are responsible for autism.

Facts

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Autism Spectrum Disorder occurs in about 1 of every 166 individuals, and four times more often in boys than girls. Families of all racial, ethnic and social backgrounds anywhere in the world are affected.

Autism occurs by itself, with mental retardation, or with other health problems, such as epilepsy, viral infections, or changes in a person's growth rate or metabolism.

Less than 5 percent of individuals with autism exhibit the genius-like (savant). However, many individuals with autism do display strengths in specific areas.

Treatment

Treatment and educational needs for people with autism and related disabilities should include:

- 1) Early and accurate diagnosis to increase the child's opportunity for positive development and success.
- 2) Professional services for persons with autism may include speech and occupational therapy and require a cooperative effort between professionals and families.
- 3) Generally, persons with autism seem to make the best progress when they are in as normal a setting as possible and provided with individualized support and therapy to meet their needs.
- 4) By implementing treatment methods in all areas of life, progress in persons with autism can be optimized.

Summary

Autism can be complex, severe and frightening, but it is not hopeless. With the help of good intervention and services, individuals with autism can make excellent progress and achieve a higher quality of life.

Suggested Readings

Cohen, D.J., & Donnellan, A.M. (1987). Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders. Silver Spring, MD: V.H. Winston & Sons

Hart, C.A. (1993). A parent's guide to autism: Answers to the most common questions. New York: Pocket Books, Simon & Schuster Co.

Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. Available from Plenum Publishing Corporation, 233 Spring Street New York, NY 10013.

Powers, M.D. (Ed.) (1989) Children with autism: A parent's guide. Rockville, MD: Woodbine House.

Organizations

Autism Society of America
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