



Autism

What is autism?



Autism is a “spectrum disorder,” which means a child’s symptoms can present in a wide variety of combinations, from mild to severe. Autism can make it difficult for a child to communicate and interact with others. It can also cause a child to perform repetitive activities and movements, become upset at changes in daily routine, and have unusual responses to certain situations.

In some children, signs of autism can be seen as early as 12 months. Babies that do not babble,

or point by age one could be showing early signs of autism. Other children may develop normal language and social skills for a time, but then begin to regress as autism presents. This is called “regressive autism.” Some people believe childhood vaccines cause older children to develop autism, but this is not proven and vaccinations should not be avoided.

Children with autism may be sensitive to touch, certain smells, loud noises, temperature extremes, and even certain colors.

Over-stimulation may

cause a child with autism to become upset and have a “meltdown.” The child may be difficult to soothe and calm down.

The reasons autism occurs are not understood, and researchers are looking for answers, as well as ways to prevent the disorder. Boys are more likely than girls to have autism.

Early diagnosis is key in helping a child reach important milestones. Your child’s doctor should first screen for autism between the ages of 18 and 24 months.

Early intervention — such as behavioral and speech therapy — can help improve a child’s learning skills and increase communication. A child with autism can be very successful in school.

Many parents find help in dealing with the stresses of autism through involvement in a local family support group.

Ways to help your child:

ONE

Begin early intervention. Starting therapies at an early age is proven to help children with autism increase skills. These interventions may include speech, behavioral, occupational, and even music therapy, and focus on helping a child learn to properly interact with people and surroundings.

TWO

Talk to your child during routine activities. Engage and interact whenever possible, both during playtime and in everyday situations.

Resources:

Call [Early Access](#) at 1-888-IAKIDS1 if you have child development questions or concerns.

Link to an [Area Education Agency](#) in your region for more child and family information: www.iowaaea.org. Find a contact for your area under the [AEA Directory](#) tab.

[Children with Autism: A Parents’ Guide](#) by Michael D. Powers offers a complete guide to autism.

[Autism Speaks](#) gives information about medical diagnosis, as well as links to local agencies.

Specialized healthcare for children with autism is available at the [Child Health Specialty Clinics](#) at the University of Iowa.

This factsheet is part of an informational series for parents of children ages 0-5, developed by the Iowa Department of Education Early Childhood Services Bureau. (Updated April 2010)

Three important facts about autism:

1. Autism can affect any child. As many as one in 110 children has autism, and there are many theories behind the cause, but no exact answer.

2. There is no known cause of autism. Many theories exist about how or why a child develops autism, but no one really knows for sure. Some people believe that withholding childhood vaccines can prevent autism. This is not

medically proven, and can result in your child contracting a rare and dangerous illness.

3. There is no cure for autism. However, research has shown that with early intervention and continued therapies, a child with autism can lead an independent, productive, and happy life. (Always talk to your child’s doctor or an autism expert before starting a new therapy.)

THREE

Create opportunities for your child to interact with you, and others. For example, store favorite toys out of reach so your child must come to you and ask for them.

FOUR

Encourage your child to try new things, and celebrate even small accomplishments. Use rewards to motivate your child to be independent, try harder skills, and self-correct behavior.