



What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a term often used to describe a whole range of overlapping developmental difficulties that children may have. It is not strictly a medical classification but is widely used as a diagnostic label because it groups together all the variants of this disorder. For a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder to be given, it is generally agreed that there must be difficulties in all three of the following core areas:

Communication

Language difficulties range from no speech at all to fluent speech with unusual features (such as talking mainly about their own topics of interest, rather than true conversation). There is always some level of difficulty in understanding spoken language and with understanding the other clues to meaning in what we say, eg: body language, gesture, tone of voice, facial expression.

Social Interaction

Difficulties in getting on with other people range from aloofness and indifference to wanting desperately to make friends but lacking the necessary understanding of social rules and other people's feelings to do so successfully.

Flexibility of thought and behaviour

This may be shown in repetitive activity, a lack of pretend play and imaginative problem solving, presence of obsessive interests and rituals and distress at changes of routine.

Glossary

Able autism Used to describe children with good overall intellectual ability. Their earlier language difficulties may have improved but they will still have great difficulties with social interaction and may not wish to be sociable at all.

Asperger Syndrome Used to describe children of average to above-average intelligence who do not have obvious speech and language difficulties (although they do still have problems with communication as a whole). These children often desire to be sociable but lack the necessary understanding of social rules to achieve this. They are often very aware of being different but their abilities can mask their difficulties. This can mean that they are often not identified and diagnosed until late childhood or adulthood. The name comes from Hans Asperger, who first described this condition.

Atypical autism Used to describe children with difficulties in two out of the three areas of the 'Triad' that typify ASD.

Autism May be used as a generic term interchangeably with ASD but more often used these days to describe difficulties at the more severe end of the autism spectrum.

Autistic continuum Means the same as 'autistic spectrum' or 'autism spectrum'.

Autistic features Shows some, but not all, characteristics of ASD.

Autistic savant Someone with ASD whose ability is generally low to average, but who has one much higher skill, eg: a significant talent for music, maths or art.

Autistic tendencies See 'autistic features'.

Autistic traits See 'autistic features'.

Childhood autism Describes autism in children.

Classic/classical autism Describes children at the less-able end of the spectrum with severe difficulties in all three key areas.

Core autism See 'classic autism'.

High functioning autism See 'able autism'.

Infantile autism See 'childhood autism'.

Attachment Disorder Difficulties in relating to other people, forming and maintaining relationships. Usually caused by interruption to a child's emotional development in early childhood as a result of trauma, separation, constant change of routine, neglect or abuse.

DAMP – Disorder of Attention, Motor Co-ordination and Perception Significant difficulty in all three areas.

Depression Can happen in children and young people with ASD at all levels of ability. A family history of depression is a risk factor. Warning signs may be changes in behaviour, apathy, tearfulness, sleep problems, aggression or self-injury.

Down Syndrome A genetic condition caused by the extra chromosome 21 and one of the most common causes of learning difficulties. The child is affected in growth and development. Alongside typical physical features, there are often heart, weight and hearing problems, dry skin and a tendency towards more coughs and colds than average.

Dyslexia A specific learning disability causing ongoing problems with reading, writing and spelling (and often maths) because of perceptual difficulties (interpreting what we see) in identifying letters and numbers, which may appear blurred or distorted, and listening difficulties in identifying sounds which make up words and matching the spoken word with its printed symbol.

Dyspraxia Developmental Co-ordination Disorder or 'Clumsy Child Syndrome'. Difficulties with balance and controlling movements lead to problems with dressing (buttons, shoelaces), PE, riding a bike, holding a pencil etc. Verbal (oral, or articulatory) dyspraxia causes speech difficulties because of problems co-ordinating mouth and tongue movements to make sounds and put sounds together to make words, phrases and sentences.

Epilepsy Approximately one third of the ASD population develop epilepsy (mostly those with learning difficulties). There are many different forms and it may be difficult to recognise the condition. 'Grand mal' seizures (fits) affect the whole brain and the child loses consciousness. 'Petit mal' seizures involve a specific part of the brain and can be simple or complex, depending on which part of the brain is affected.

Fragile-X Syndrome A genetic condition caused by a defect in the X chromosome and one of the most common causes of learning disability. It is found predominantly in males. Delay in speech and language and overall development varies from slight to severe. Children with the syndrome have

Specific Learning Difficulties Overall development may be appropriate for the child's age, but there may be specific areas of difficulty, eg: reading, writing or maths. See 'dyslexia'.

Speech/Language Difficulties Extremely common as communication is one of the three main areas of difficulty in ASD.

Tourette's Syndrome Characterised by multiple tics, including facial and vocal tics, Tourette's Syndrome has a later onset than ASD, generally between 5 and 11 years of age. Children show some of the same behaviours in that they act impulsively and without apparent note of the social context. Some severely affected children involuntarily say obscenities or make obscene gestures. Three to four times as many boys as girls are affected.

Tuberous Sclerosis A genetic disorder characterised by the growth of benign tumours on the brain and skin. About 50% have learning difficulties and the majority have seizures. It is estimated that between 17% and 58% of those with tuberous sclerosis have an ASD.

Visual Impairment Problems with vision are quite common but often overlooked in ASD.

Williams' Syndrome A genetic disorder which is associated with distinctive facial features and learning difficulties. The children often display some of the behaviour seen in children with an ASD (for example, talking repetitively about certain topics; social isolation from peers; attention difficulties), but unlike many with an ASD, a characteristic feature of Williams' Syndrome is their over-friendliness with others, including strangers.

Other terms

ABA Applied Behavioural Analysis

AIT Auditory Integration Therapy

BSS Behaviour Support Service

CAMHS Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service

CASDAS Communication and Social Development Assessment Service

EYAP Early Years Assessment Plan

EYDCP Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership

Fine Motor Skills Ability to handle small objects with dexterity: use scissors, hold a pencil appropriately and exercise control in writing, drawing etc.

GEP Group Education Plan

GP General Practitioner

Gross Motor Skills Ability to walk, run, jump, climb with agility. Also includes throwing, catching and kicking a ball, a sense of balance, eg: riding a bike, and spatial awareness, ie: control over where your body is in space and time and how it moves.

IEP Individual Education Plan

IPS Independent Parental Supporter

IQ Intelligence Quotient

LEA Local Education Authority

LSA/LSP Learning Support Assistant/Practitioner

LSS Learning Support Service

MAA Multi Agency Assessment

MD Medical Doctor

NAS National Autistic Society

OT Occupational Therapist

Optician Person qualified to make and sell spectacles and contact lenses.

Optometrist Person trained in detecting and correcting poor eyesight.

Orthoptist Person trained in the study or treatment of irregularities of the eye, especially eye muscles.

PCP Person Centred Planning

PCT Primary Care Trust

PECS Picture Exchange Communication System

PEP Personal Education Plan (Looked After Children)

PPS Parent Partnership Service

Pragmatic Knowing what to say, when and how to say it to other people.