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BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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Autism: What You Need to Know Understanding the Condition to Help Your Children

Do you have a child who isn't developing normally, especially with communication and social skills? Or a child who seems to have developed fine, then started to regress before age three?

Most parents already have a sense that something is different before they get a diagnosis of autism for their child. And the reaction when they hear the diagnosis is often one of helplessness, guilt, anger or depression. Or a thought of "What did we do wrong?"

The first thing to do is learn more, then focus on early treatment, along with support for your other children.

What Is Autism?

Autism is the best known of the pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs), a group of conditions that involve delayed or impaired communication and social skills, behaviors, and learning. Other PDDs include Asperger's syndrome, child disintegrative disorder and Rett's syndrome. Together, the PDDs are known as autism spectrum disorders (ASDs).¹

Kids who show some of the behaviors in the sidebar should be evaluated by a doctor. No blood tests or brain tests (such as MRIs) can diagnose ASDs, although such tests might be done to check for other conditions that could cause the symptoms. Doctors may use questionnaires, educational and cognitive

assessments, language assessments, or play and behavior assessments to help diagnose autism.¹

What Causes Autism?

Causes of autism are not yet well understood. Scientists believe they're complex brain biology problems, which might have a genetic basis like other conditions stemming from abnormalities in the chromosomes.¹

Some studies have suggested that autism results from a host of causes, including food allergies, excessive amounts of yeast in the digestive tract, and exposure to environmental toxins. However, these theories aren't scientifically proven. The vast majority of scientific studies have found no link between vaccines and autism. It's also important to

Watch for Early Signs of Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) symptoms can range from severe to subtle. Here are a few to look for before age three.¹

- Trouble playing with or relating to others
- Avoiding eye contact
- Not pointing to objects to call attention to them
- Unusual movements, such as hand flapping, spinning or tapping
- Delays in developmental milestones or loss of milestones already achieved
- Playing with the same toy in a way that seems odd or repetitive
- Not using or understanding language
- Not exploring surroundings with curiosity or interest

If your child is older, additional signs include: being distracted by sensory input, going into a rage because of the texture or fit of clothing, and becoming terrified by certain sounds.³

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remember that autism is not caused by parenting or bad experiences.¹

Helping Your Child

There is no cure for autism; however, getting help early can make a big difference in how well your child builds skills and achieves self-sufficiency. Treatment should be personalized because every child has different needs, and symptoms can range from mild to severe.

For most children, the first efforts at treatment focus on communication problems, using speech and language therapy, with special attention to nonverbal communication.

Individually tailored programs can include behavior modification, and educational interventions can help shape a child's behaviors

and improve speech and communication.¹ Applied Behavioral Analysis uses positive reinforcement and other principles to build communication, play, social, academic, self-care, work, and community living skills, as well as reduce problem behaviors.²

Medications may also be used to treat symptoms. Special diets and remedies may be promising, but have not been scientifically proven, so check with your child's doctor before you try one.

Education Is Key

Under federal law, autistic children are entitled to an education specific to their needs, and some states and local authorities provide services that go beyond this federal mandate.¹ Here are

some examples of programs you can check:

- Free preschool services starting at age three are available under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These might be offered by your local school district, Intermediate Unit, or organizations such as Easter Seals and United Cerebral Palsy (UCP).
- Early intervention programs for children up to age three are also available through your state through IDEA.
- Once your child is of school age, your local school district can set up an individualized education plan (IEP) tailored specifically for your child. It's a good idea to work closely with your child's

teachers to find out what rewards and behavior modification techniques help in the classroom, then use some of these at home for a consistent message.

- Some children may need more help if their symptoms are severe and they have difficult behavioral problems. These can include disability assistance through Social Security, special services through medical centers and physicians, and support services such as speech therapy.

Resources

United Behavioral Health

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.

www.liveandworkwell.com

- Visit the "Autism" Mental Health Condition Center for more information and resources about this condition.

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Siblings Need Support Too!

A child with autism affects the entire family. Brothers and sisters can feel resentful of the attention spent on the child with autism. They may be embarrassed by their sibling's behavior or worry that they may develop the symptoms.

It's important to focus on your other children at the same time you're working to help your child with autism. When siblings are included, they

can be helpful and develop nurturing skills.

1. Provide siblings with information about ASD and what to expect with their sibling's behavior and development.
2. Let them know how they can help. This will give them more positive feelings toward the situation and toward their sibling.
3. Schedule time with siblings as well as with your child with autism. They need to know that they're still important to you.
4. Give siblings time off from any extra responsibilities they've been asked to take on.
5. Consider a support group, that can help siblings cope with a sister or brother with ASD.

1 Kids Health. "About Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders." http://kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?lic=62&article_set=22573. Accessed July 25, 2010.

2 Autism Speaks. <http://www.autismspeaks.org/whattodo/index.php>. Accessed September 15, 2010.

3 Johns Hopkins Health Information. "Your Child Has Been Diagnosed with Autism. Now What?" [Liveandworkwell.com. https://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/search/showArticle.asp?articleID=12575&keyword=autism](http://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/search/showArticle.asp?articleID=12575&keyword=autism). Accessed July 25, 2010.