PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Early Intervention

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What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), or autism, is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulty with communication, social interaction, and restricted or repetitive behaviors. Because ASD includes a broad spectrum of behaviors, children with ASD can look very different from one another. For example, the parent of an otherwise happy toddler might notice that she prefers to play by herself instead of joining in with other children. Another child may demonstrate significant delays in developmental motor and language milestones and show signs of sensory integration challenges such as a limited diet, sleep challenges, and outbursts with changes in routine.

How is ASD diagnosed?

While ASD involves neurobiological differences, medical tests have not yet been developed to diagnose it. Instead, clinicians diagnose ASD by gathering data about behavioral patterns, cognitive abilities, executive functioning, and social development. Autistic individuals typically display signs and symptoms at an early age. Here are some warning signs to look for:

- Regression of previously acquired language and developmental skills
- Limited or no shared attention and/or social-emotional reciprocity
- Difficulty with peer relationships
- Social disconnect or disinterest
- Avoidance of eye contact
- Lack of response to name being called
- Limited or no imitative and/or pretend play
- Repetitive motor movements
- Frequent repetition of words or phrases spoken by others (echolalia)
- Behavioral inflexibility
- Difficulty with transitions and change
- Highly restricted areas of interest
- Sensory sensitivity or hyporeactivity

Importance of Early Detection and Intervention:

While ASD can be diagnosed as early as 14 months, many children are diagnosed between the ages of three and five. Early detection and intervention for ASD are extremely important. Children who receive early intervention services, particularly those targeting symptoms of

ASD, are more likely to demonstrate greater progress in overall development when these interventions are implemented at an earlier age. If children are school-aged, it is important to request a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation from your child's school to determine beneficial and appropriate academic and/or behavioral interventions in the school setting.

Helping children with ASD:

There are many ways to help children with ASD. The interventions below are just a few approaches that may be beneficial for those with ASD or developmental delays. A mental health professional or education professional with training in ASD can help you decide which services are appropriate for your child. Some of these services may be available at no cost through your child's school.

- Early Intervention Services
- Speech, Occupational, or Physical therapy
- Applied Behavioral Analysis Therapy
- Parent-Child Interaction Training
- Outpatient individual and family psychotherapy
- Social skills groups
- Medical interventions for co-occurring problems (i.e., developmental pediatrician, genetic testing)

Additional information regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder, including signs, symptoms, and treatment, can be found at https://www.chop.edu/conditions-diseases/autism-spectrum-disorder-in-children.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at https://www.papsy.org/locator. For information on other mental health topics, go to https://www.papsy.org, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.