



[This section prints out on 7 pages]

## Autism

**Autism is a serious problem. But there are things you can do to help your child. Try to understand the problem. Find out about treatments that work.**

### **What is autism?**

**Autism (AW-tizm)** is a problem in the way a child's brain has developed. It's not a disease, or an infection that can spread from person to person.

### **What does autism look like?**

Children with autism have trouble with:

- Looking at other children
- Playing with other children
- Communicating
- Signing or speaking
- Showing imagination

Many children with autism like to do the same things over and over again. They can get very good at doing certain things, like math or music.

### **Does your child have autism?**

If you think your child has autism, ask yourself these questions:

- Does he have trouble watching people as they talk or sign to him?
- Does he shy away from playing with other children?
- Does he not enjoy playing games that involve imagination, like "house" or "firefighter" or "store", etc.?
- Do you have to teach him phrases over and over again so he can talk to people?
- Does he like to play with or do certain things over and over again?
- Are there times when your child **MUST** follow a certain pattern or a routine? Does he get very upset if that routine is changed?

If you answered "yes" to 1 or more of these questions, get your child tested. Once you know what problems he has, you can get help for him.

If you're worried about how your child acts, don't wait. Many people may try to reassure you. They may say that deafness is the reason for these problems. But it isn't. Talk about it with your child's teacher. And watch other deaf children play. You can see if your child plays and behaves like the other children.

### **Sometimes autism and deafness get mixed up.**

Many parents think that their child's strange behaviors are caused by deafness, and that everything would be different if their child could just hear. But autism is a separate problem that happens to hearing children, too.

Some people say that children with autism "act like they are deaf" because they do not look at you or answer when you call them. But hearing aids do not fix this problem for hearing children - or for deaf children.

### **Deaf children learn about the world through their eyes.**

For a long time, people thought that problems caused by autism were really caused by deafness. Now we know that they are not.

Deaf children use their eyes to learn about the world. They love to watch other people. Even before they start speaking or signing, they learn how to make people understand them (like by using gestures). But deaf children with autism don't do this well.

### **There are different kinds of autism.**

Not all children are autistic in the same way:

- Some like to spin and twirl their toys. Others never do that.
- Some enjoy being around people. Others prefer playing alone.
- Some enjoy being tickled. Others don't want to be touched.

### **Some children are more autistic than others.**

Some children have only very mild signs of autism. Others have severe autism. We call this range from very mild to the most severe autism an **autism spectrum** or **continuum (kon-TIN-yoo-um)**.

- **Mild autism** - when children have just a few signs of autism that are not very serious. They may have trouble looking at you "eye to eye," and like counting things.
- **Severe autism** - when children find it almost impossible to look at people directly or to talk or sign. They seem to be involved in their own world. But these children are watching and learning in their own way. We need to work hard to understand their world, and how they experience everything around them.

**Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)** is another phrase that describes when a child has trouble connecting with others. Or when a child does some of the things listed above. Some doctors will write PDD-NOS. This means the same thing as PDD.

### **Asperger's Syndrome**

Some children have some of these problems, but in a very mild way. Some doctors believe that this is a mild form of autism and call it **Asperger's Syndrome (ASS-perg-erz SIN-drum)**. Other doctors feel that this is a completely different problem.

Here's what a child with Asperger's Syndrome can look like:

- He may not understand what people usually do in certain situations.
- He may have trouble understanding how other people feel. He may not understand why other people act and say what they do.
- He may be able to speak or sign as well as other deaf children at his age.
- He may be even smarter in some areas. Especially math, science or music.
- He may be very clumsy. He may not be very good at sports.
- He may even not be very good with writing, or working with his hands.
- He may have problems paying attention. He may even look like he has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ADHD.
- He may have terrible manners or habits like picking his nose, and seem like he does not care about what other people think.

### **What causes autism**

No one knows what causes autism. But we do know that it is NOT caused by bad parenting or not spending enough time with your child. We know now that it's caused by something that happens in the brain.

There is no 1 reason that children become autistic. Most children have had this problem since they were born, even if we do not always realize it until they are older. Most children with autism have problems from the time that they are very, very little.

- They may be calm babies, lying for hours without crying or fussing.
- But they don't look you in the eye. And they may be more interested in the ceiling fan or a light than your face.
- These babies don't play the same way that healthy babies and toddlers do.

Many things that cause deafness can also cause autism. This may be why there may be more deaf children with autism than hearing children with autism. These are some causes of deafness and autism:

- [CMV, or cytomegalovirus](http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/hearingloss/causes/cm.v.jsp)  
(<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/hearingloss/causes/cm.v.jsp>)
- [Rubella, also known as German measles](http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/hearingloss/causes/rubella.jsp)  
(<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/hearingloss/causes/rubella.jsp>)
- [Other infections that happen while the baby is growing in the mother's womb](http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/hearingloss/causes/#infection)  
(<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/hearingloss/causes/#infection>)

### **Signs of autism in deaf babies:**

- They may not smile at you when you smile at them. Often they are very quiet and easy babies, staying in the crib without crying out for attention.
- They may be very interested in moving things, like ceiling fans or lights, and less interested in your face.
- They may not copy you when you clap hands, wave 'bye-bye' or play peek-a-boo.
- Sometimes it feels like they are looking 'through you' instead of looking AT you.
- They may look up at the ceiling, instead of paying attention to someone who's trying to play with them. This is a big problem for deaf babies and children. Deaf children really need to look to learn.

### **Signs of autism in deaf children:**

- Deaf children with autism don't look at other people in the eye. For deaf people, when you don't look each other in the eye, you can't communicate. This is true for both children who sign, and for children who mainly talk.
- They don't always respond when somebody calls their name, taps their shoulder, or signs to them.
- They don't "get" other people's feelings.
  - Children with autism don't respond to or understand other people's feelings.
  - Autistic children don't look at other people's faces.
  - Some autistic children may act as if they don't care about other people's feelings.

Autistic children often do the same thing over and over again. Like:

- Rocking
- Twirling
- Hand biting
- Hand flapping
- Spinning

Deaf children without autism don't do these things unless they have been ignored or neglected for a very long time.

### **Get help from experts.**

Taking the first step and admitting that your child may need help is sometimes the hardest part of all. After you find out that your child is deaf, and you begin to accept that, adding another problem such as autism may feel like just too much. Many parents are afraid of what the word 'autism' will mean. Sometimes they want to wait before dealing with another label. Or, they just hope it will get better on its own.

Find the right help EARLY. It will make a big difference in how your child grows and learns. He may need lots of help, even from people both in your home and in their offices and centers.

**Find a professional who knows about deafness.**

Tell them about your worries and the troubles your child has. Some of the people who work with children with autism are:

- teachers
- early intervention specialists
- occupational therapists
- physical therapists
- speech and language therapists
- play therapists
- behavior specialists
- developmental pediatricians or child psychiatrists. These doctors are interested in how children develop. They can get to know your child over time and adjust treatment as he grows.

Whew — that's a lot of people! But they all can help in different ways.

**Different ways of teaching your child**

There are also different approaches to teaching children with autism. Some doctors prefer an approach that helps your child to communicate with you through play. Others recommend that you focus on teaching your child different behaviors. Some people mix different approaches together. All ways take a lot of time and hard work.

There are many ways to teach your child about the world. There are many ways to teach your child how to control himself. And there are many ways to help you learn about how your child's mind works.

Your doctor may also suggest giving your child medicine to help him pay attention or learn better. Sometimes medicine will help with making your child less nervous and improving the behaviors that way.

**How you can help your child grow**

Having a deaf children with autism can seem like a huge challenge. You may have to help your child more to learn and be independent than other children. But children with autism can improve in many ways. Some people with autism do grow up and marry, have children, and work independently. They just need lots of their parents' help for a while.

Whatever kind of autism your child has, he can get help. Your child needs help that pushes him to learn about his own feelings and the feelings of others. He may also need special help to remember things that he learns in school. Give your child encouragement, and show him that you believe in him.

**How you can help your deaf child communicate**

Usually, language develops without much work. But for deaf children with autism, sometimes getting words and ideas out is very hard. Parents need to use everything they can, including making faces, gesturing, smiling a lot, and jumping around the room to get their children to notice them and respond.

### **Using sign language**

If your child has trouble looking at people, sign language can still be useful. Children with autism use their peripheral or side vision to see what people are saying. The best is when you can get your child to focus and watch what you are signing. This is something that is best learned early in life and much harder when the habit of not looking is well established.

Some people believe that [hearing aids](http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/help/tech/hearingaids/) (<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/help/tech/hearingaids/>) or [cochlear implants](http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/help/tech/ci/) (<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/help/tech/ci/>) are even more important for children with autism, so that they can hear when they are not looking. Others disagree.

### **Teaching your child to tell you what he wants**

Sometimes children with autism have a lot of trouble telling people what they want or need, and then act up because they are frustrated. Pictures can be used to help these children develop language. This is called **Picture Exchange Communication Systems** or **PECS**.

Here is an example of how to help your child ask YOU for what he wants:

1. Pick 1 of your child's favorite foods and make sure that he sees you. Sit down and eat the food in front of him. Take your time and don't offer any - wait for him to come to you.
2. Encourage him to tell you in some way that he wants the food. In the beginning, this may be eye contact. It is okay to accept simple tries at first - like eye contact, pulling your hand, reaching, etc.
3. As your child becomes more used to asking for things, you can show and teach better ways of asking for things, like - saying or signing, "please" or the name of the object, or pointing to it.

Do the same as above with a favorite toy, pet or other things.

Teach your child to communicate that he DOES NOT want or like something:

- Hold something that your child does not like out to him. If he walks away, follow him around with it. Encourage him to tell you that he does not want it (by pushing your hand away, saying or signing, "no").
- Start by accepting simple answers like looking away, turning away, or walking away. But soon, you will expect more, so show your child how to say or sign, "No!" or "I don't want it!"
- Ask someone to stand behind your child and help your child sign these things if he can't do it alone. This person can put move your child's hands or body the way they need to go.
- This is the beginning and it teaches your child that you expect communication before he will get what he wants, or get away from what he wants to avoid.

### **Help your child by putting play and learning together**

Children with autism love playing and learning. They learn best when they love the person who is working with them!

Teaching a child with autism works best when parents and/or therapists think about what the child can do, and likes to do. Here's an example:

- If your child likes playing with cars, play with him using cars and trucks.
- Teach your child words about cars - car, truck, wheels, fast, go, race.
- Have a race, and say out loud what's happening in the race. "Eric's car is turning the corner, and Mommy's car is catching up!"
- Find something interesting to draw your child out. This can help him to pay attention and play with you. From this, the child will start to feel a bond with you. While you are playing, you can teach your child to ask for help.
- Find a wind up toy and show your child what it does. Do this 1 or 2 times or until your child shows interest. This time let the toy stop or turn it off and wait. When your child looks at you, act dumb. Shrug your shoulders, and then ask, "What happened?"
- Wait for him to show you that he wants you to start the toy again.
- Begin with easy tries like pointing and looking at you and the toy.
- Next, expect more and better ways to ask for help, like signing a word like "more" or "help".

Here are a few other ideas to teach your child to ask for help:

- Open a jar of bubbles, blow the bubbles, and then close the lid tightly. Now give the closed jar to your child. Wait for your child to communicate with you before you open the jar or blow more bubbles.
- Blow up a balloon. Let the air go out, and then give it to your child. Make your child tell you something before you inflate it again.
- Put a favorite toy or food in a clear plastic jar that your child cannot open. Put it in front of them and tempt them to communicate with you.

### **Learn more about autism**

- Read the book, "The Child with Special Needs, Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth," by Doctors Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder. This book tells you how to understand what your child's special needs are.
- Check out The Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders' [autism guide for parents](http://icdl.com/forparentsbyparents/toc.htm) (<http://icdl.com/forparentsbyparents/toc.htm>).

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You can find this page online at:

<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/special/autism/>