

## How and when are ASDs diagnosed?

Many parents first suspect a problem when their child does not reach developmental milestones, such as speaking his or her first words and simple back-and-forth exchanges. For example, a child may be able to complete a jigsaw puzzle with ease, but may not be able to wave “bye-bye.”

Currently, medical tests to diagnose autism are in the experimental phase and not yet available. Diagnosis must be based on observations of the child’s behavior by a trained diagnostician, usually a psychologist or neurodevelopmental pediatrician. Autism and PDDNOS are diagnosed around age three or earlier, when possible. However, Asperger’s Disorder may not be identified until school age, adolescence or even adulthood.

## How common are ASDs?

ASDs affect one in 94 children in New Jersey and one in 150 nationwide (CDC, 2007). (While the prevalence rate for adults has not been formally studied, experts estimate that many adults with other developmental disabilities would meet the current criteria for ASDs.) ASDs are 4 to 5 times more prevalent in boys than in girls and occur in all races, ethnicities and social classes.

## Are ASDs treatable?

The symptoms of ASDs can severely limit an individual’s ability to function in everyday life. Thus, early diagnosis and appropriate intervention are critical. Teaching must be individualized and delivered in a motivating and consistent manner. Evidence-based practices, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Positive Behavior Support (PBS), are known to be effective in helping children and adults learn new skills

and reach their full potential. Please visit our Web site to view our Position Statement on Treatment Recommendations and other helpful resources.

In recent years, many individuals with ASDs have spoken about their struggles and how they have overcome challenges. With effective intervention and community support, individuals with ASDs can make substantial contributions to society. Join Autism New Jersey’s efforts to help make a difference for all affected by autism.

**References:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2007). Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders— Autism and developmental disabilities monitoring network, 14 sites, United States, 2002. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 56, SS-1.

# Some common questions about autism



Call Autism New Jersey™ at  
**609.883.8100** or **800.4.AUTISM**  
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If you have more questions about autism  
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## What are autism spectrum disorders (ASDs)?

ASDs are developmental disorders that limit a person's social interaction and communication. Individuals with ASDs also have a restricted range of interests and often have difficulty learning how to perform everyday activities. **Autism, Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS)** fall under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders and are commonly referred to as "autism spectrum disorders." This term conveys the continuum of ability levels, but is not itself an official diagnosis.

## What are the major characteristics of autism?

### Difficulty with social interactions

Many individuals with autism do not spontaneously reach out to others to share information or feelings. They often do not know how to engage in simple social interactions, such as sharing an experience with another person. For example, a three-year-old child with autism may not point to an animal so that his sister will notice it too. Social skill deficits can make the development of intimate relationships difficult. However, with effective treatment, many people with autism learn to initiate interactions and enjoy time with others.

### Difficulty with communication

One of the hallmarks of autism is a delay in or a lack of development of spoken language. While many individuals with autism do develop speech, their communication may consist of single word utterances or simple sentences. Common speech abnormalities include echolalia (immediate or delayed repeating of information), unconventional word use, and unusual tone, pitch

and inflection. Even if more complex vocabulary is acquired, individuals with autism may still have poor conversational skills. They also may have difficulty understanding common nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and eye contact.

Unfortunately, some individuals with autism do not develop functional speech. However, many of them do learn to communicate through picture boards, computers, sign language, and other augmentative devices.

### Unusual behaviors

Individuals with autism have a restricted range of interests. For example, a six-year-old child with autism may play with his or her toy train to the exclusion of all other toys. Additionally, people with autism may engage in peculiar, sustained play activities such as spinning the wheels on a toy car rather than pretending to drive it, or finding a shoestring and dangling it in front of their eyes for long periods of time. Individuals with autism also can be very resistant to changes in routine. Even a minor change could be a great upset to a child or adult with autism.

## What are some associated features of autism?

- Acts as though deaf
- High or low activity level
- Little or no apparent fear of dangers
- Unusual responses to sensations, including a high tolerance for pain
- Eating, sleeping, and toileting difficulties
- Seizure disorder
- Aggressive or self-injurious behavior
- Savant abilities (present in less than 2% of individuals diagnosed with autism)

## Do some people with autism also have intellectual impairments?

Yes. While many individuals with autism learn more slowly than their peers, all individuals make progress with effective teaching practices. Most importantly, all individuals deserve every opportunity to learn and aspire to their fullest potential.

## What is Asperger's Disorder?

Asperger's Disorder also is a developmental disorder that limits an individual's social skills, range of interests and adaptive behavior. However, unlike those with autism, individuals with Asperger's Disorder do not have a history of substantial cognitive or communication delays (although more specific language difficulties may be present).

## What is PDDNOS?

PDDNOS is the abbreviation for the diagnosis of Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. A diagnosis of PDDNOS is made when a child exhibits only some deficits, an atypical pattern of deficits, or if the onset of the disorder (not the diagnosis) is later than age three. The distinction between a diagnosis of autism and PDDNOS often is subtle.

## What causes ASDs?

While the exact causes are unknown, current research suggests that ASDs are highly genetic disorders that may be triggered by environmental factors. It should be noted that bad parenting does not cause ASDs.