

Tip Sheets

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that 1 in 31 (3.2%) children aged 8 years has been identified with ASD. There is no medical detection for autism. Early intervention, however, affords the best opportunity to support healthy development and deliver benefits across the lifespan.

ASD Facts and Statistics from the CDC

- ASD is reported to occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.
 - Prevalence was lower among White children (28%) than other racial groups, including Black (37%) and Hispanic (33%) children.
- ASD is more than 3 times more common among boys than among girls.
- Among children aged 8 years with ASD with data on cognitive ability, 36% had intelligence quotient (IQ) scores in the average to above average range (IQ >85).
 - 40% were classified as having intellectual disability (IQ <70).
 - 24% were in the borderline range (IQ 71–85).
- Autism prevalence among children aged 8 years increased from 2020 to 2022. Continued increases in prevalence and improvements in early identification of ASD could indicate increasing need for services.

Opportunities exist to learn from successful policies and practices across communities and implement approaches for equitable identification and service eligibility to help children and families receive the support they need as early as possible to improve outcomes for children with ASD.

AUTISM AS A SPECTRUM DISORDER

Considered to be a life-long disability, autism is described as a behavioral disorder in which the number of characteristics and symptoms vary in severity along a spectrum from mild to severe, from one child to the next.

ASD is described as an uneven profile of development with a pattern of:

- Qualitative impairments in understanding social relationships,
- Deficits in communication development, and
- Unusual patterns of behavior, interest, and activities.

Affected Areas of Development

- **Communication Skills:** The way a child communicates, understands, and uses language.
- **Social Skills:** How a child interacts socially with others.
- **Sensory and Behavioral Skills:** How a child understands and responds to his/her environment and the world around him/her.

Challenges Relating to People, Objects, and Events

- Unusual attachment to certain objects
- May not seek cuddling or physical attention
- Difficulty with imitation skills
- Difficulty with reciprocal social interaction
- Absent or unusual social play

- Difficulty interacting with other children
- Preference for being alone; aloof manner
- Difficulty expressing needs
- Uses gestures or pointing instead of words
- Difficulty making and keeping friends

Sustained Repetitive and Unusual Play

- Uneven gross and/or fine motor skills
- Unresponsive to verbal cues
- Little to no eye contact
- Insistence on sameness/resistance to change
- Noticeable physical over- or under-activity
- Displays extreme distress for no obvious reason

Speech and Language Absence or Delays

- Inappropriate laughing/giggling
- Echolalia (repetition of words/phrases in place of normal language); unusual use of speech
- Abnormalities in nonverbal communication: eye contact, facial expressions, body postures, and gestures to initiate social interaction
- Abnormalities in production of speech (volume, pitch, stress, rhythm and/or pacing)
- Abnormalities in sound of speech (monotone, high pitch and/or inflection)

Strategies for:

Meeting Sensory and Behavioral Needs

- Keep loud noises to a minimum; many children have strong reactions to noise.
- Be aware of visual distractions and environmental distractions such as bright lights, buzzing fluorescent bulbs, etc.
- Provide headphones or other methods to muffle loud sounds.
- Use structure and routine.
- Ensure opportunities for getting away from sensory overload.
- Organize the environment with visual cues such as picture schedules, prompts, etc.

- Incorporate relaxation techniques and massage (Check with parent/therapist before using).

Supporting Social Skills

- Plan for transitions between settings/events.
- Practice taking another person's perspective (role plays, dramatic play, etc.).
- Support the child in entering a play situation, get him/her going and monitor when further support may be needed. Allow for independence when appropriate.
- Offer social scripts for play scenarios, transitions, new events, etc.
- Occasionally provide opportunities for quiet time or individual activities.
- Use repetition to teach social skills.
- Promote new learning in small steps.

Meeting Communication and Language Needs

- Try alternative communication strategies as directed by therapists or special educators.
- Visual prompts/aids are often very effective.
 - Use picture/story boards and visual schedules and calendars.
 - Label items/bins with pictures and text.
 - Use concrete visual methods to teach numbers and math concepts.
- Repetition is essential.
- Use a child's interests as a teaching strategy.

Additional Resources

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/index.html>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

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