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Autism Has Many Faces



April is National Autism Awareness Month

What does autism look like? Even for an expert, the answer's not always clear. That's because autism isn't just one disorder. Instead, it's a spectrum disorder, a set of issues that can be mild, severe or anywhere between.

Autism is called a developmental disability because it starts during a child's developmental period—before age 3, says the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). It causes delays or problems in the ways in which a child develops or grows.

Children with autism may have high or low IQs. They may be chatty or silent, outgoing or shy, good or bad students.

They may or may not have unusual talents. Some are easygoing, while others have severe behavior issues.

What do they have in common? Delays or disabilities when it comes to social skills such as ordinary conversation, eye contact, and hugging or holding another person, as well as emotional understanding of others. Children with autism have difficulty with both verbal and unspoken communication. They also have problems with routines and repetitive behaviors, sometimes repeating words over and over or obsessively following routines, the NICHD says. Most children with autism also share delays in motor skills.

Cuts across groups

Autism affects all racial, ethnic, and social groups. Boys are up to four times more likely than girls to be affected by autism, the NICHD says. If a family has one child with autism, the family has a 5 to 10 percent chance of having another child with autism.

Most experts agree that early intervention is important in treating autism. But how can parents spot problems that might lead to a diagnosis?

Developmental pediatrician Adrian Sandler, M.D., is medical director of the Olson Huff Center in Asheville, N.C. He says you can see red flags that might point to autism in a child as young as 1 year old.

According to the NICHD, a child should immediately be evaluated for autism if the child:

- Doesn't babble or coo by 12 months of age
- Doesn't point, wave, grasp or make other gestures by 12 months
- Doesn't say single words by 16 months
- Doesn't say two-word phrases on his or her own by 24 months
- Has any loss of any language or social skill at any age

If the doctor finds that a child has signs of autism, the child will be sent to a specialist to be tested and to rule out other disorders, the NICHD says.

"You certainly want an evaluator with a good background in the autism spectrum—a child psychologist, developmental pediatrician or neurologist—who can do a careful observation. Expect a lot of questions," says Robert Naseef, Ph.D., a psychologist and author. "A good evaluation is more than a label. It will help with interventions."

Therapies can help

There is no standard treatment, and no cure. But many therapies can help, the NICHD says. Once parents place their child in a good education program, they often mix and match approaches to meet the child's needs. Therapies include:

- Individual education programs (IEPs), tailored to a specific child.
- Comprehensive treatment programs, which cover learning methods, behavior change and developmental goals.
- Programs that focus on reducing behavior problems and teaching skills.
- Programs that try to increase good behavior, reduce problem behavior and improve lifestyle.
- Medications, which are often used to deal with a specific behavior.

Krames Staywell

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