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Autism Awareness

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What is Autism?

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Autism is a neurological condition (having to do with brain development), that starts in early childhood, where toddlers have difficulty in talking to and playing with others. Autism affects the ability of a person to communicate their needs and learn. It is a condition that is now showing up in children at an alarming rate. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (C.D.C.), autism may occur in as many as 1 in every 68 children. Psychologists and pediatricians are looking for answers as to why so many people now have autism, and what can be done about it. They have been looking for signs of autism in young people for more than 30 years. There is no cure, but there is a lot that can be done. To understand more about autism, experts studying this disease first look for symptoms. What are some of the symptoms you might see in person diagnosed with Autism?

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Symptoms of Autism

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If you were to point out an object across the room, would a child with autism look at it? (For example, if you point at a toy or an animal, would the child look in the direction of the toy or animal?) The child may not. Children with autism can show a lack of focused attention on toys and others. Some children with autism at times even behave in a way that makes them appear to be deaf to others. Would a child with autism respond when you call his or her name? (For example, would he or she look up at the person who is talking?) The child may not. Children with autism can have difficulty responding to others. Would such a child play pretend or make-believe? (For example, would the child pretend to drink from an empty cup, pretend to talk on a phone, or pretend to feed a doll

339 or stuffed animal?) Children with autism frequently show a lack of imaginative play.
350 Sometimes children with autism make unusual wiggling finger movements near their
351 face.

365 Many children with autism show a lack of interaction with others. Does a child
380 with autism show an interest in other children? Does the child watch other children, smile
394 at them, or go to them? Instead of interacting, children with autism might separate
408 themselves from others. Does the child get upset by everyday noises? (For example, does
424 the child scream or cry when hearing loud noises such as a vacuum cleaner or loud
437 music?) Many children with autism have a hypersensitivity to loud sounds like an
456 ambulance siren or a school bell. Does the child look you in the eye when you are talking
471 to him, playing with him, or dressing him? Children with autism might not make eye
485 contact with people speaking to them. Children with autism might show an avoidance to
500 touch, closeness, or contact with water. A child with autism may avoid hugs, touches like
517 ‘high-fives’ or ‘fist bumps’, or take steps to avoid contact with water, such as a sidewalk
531 that is made wet from lawn sprinklers. Some children with autism frequently walk on
548 tiptoes, others pull on their earlobes, and many like to spin in circles. These are not the
562 only symptoms children with autism may show, and not all children with autism will
577 display all of these symptoms. But these are signs, that often help psychologists make an
582 early, preliminary diagnosis of autism.

593 There are other signs of autism seen during pediatric psychological evaluations
608 that specialists refer to as ‘indicators’ of autism. These include lining up toy cars instead
623 of the child making them go, “Vroom, vroom”, or using blocks to make slender towers
638 instead of a more elaborate ‘house’ or other creation. Speech delay, where the child has

656 few or no words in his vocabulary, long after the time when most typical 1 and 2 year
671 olds begin talking, is the most telling symptom of autism in children. Many children with
689 mild autism don't begin to speak until they are three or four years old. And even then, the
706 number of words the child will use is limited to just a few dozen. Children with severe
712 autism may never speak at all.

723 In older children, teens, and young adults, some symptoms that manifest
739 themselves are 'self-talk' (talking to self in a low voice that others nearby can hear),
755 scratching their skin, biting skin on hands and fingernails, and a habit of tearing bits of
772 paper and saving the scraps. These are generally indicators of stress that the child feels
784 about school, social situations, or concern about being punished for secretly damaging
798 something in the home. Many young people with autism can have food allergies and
806 serious issues with digesting certain kinds of foods.

809 **The Autism Spectrum**

821 What does the word *Spectrum* mean in the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum
836 Disorder (A.S.D.)? *Spectrum*, as we know from art, describes the range of a color tint
856 mixed in, to make a light, mild shade of a color, or with a larger amount of tint mixed in,
871 making the color more 'severely' visible. *Spectrum*, as it applies to a diagnosis of autism,
886 means that a person can have mild autism with few symptoms, or more severe autism
898 with numerous, obvious symptoms. Therefore, the more severe the autism, the more
912 difficult it is for a child to communicate with siblings, parents, and teachers. Children
924 with severe autism have more pronounced symptoms, are more distractible, and create
937 greater challenges for their parents and teachers in raising and working with them.
952 Regardless of the severity of the autism a child has, providing what is called "Early

964 Intervention” is critically important in helping a child with autism overcome these
979 challenges, learn to make friends, take care of their personal needs, and learn in school.

981 **Early Intervention**

995 What are some practices that teachers and parents can use to help a student
1009 diagnosed with autism? Teachers and parents should always try to be kind and patient.
1025 They should show an enthusiastic love of learning. They can encourage a child take up a
1039 musical instrument, interact with animals, or play a sport with peers, like youth soccer.
1053 Teachers and parents need to give clear instructions on how to do something, like
1068 brushing their teeth, putting toys away, or using their Google Drive account, one step at a
1082 time. Parents can help their child overcome a hypersensitivity to sound by helping the
1098 child himself learn to operate a blender, juicer, a vacuum or the volume control on a
1110 computer. Children with autism should be given opportunities to participate in art
1124 activities with their ‘typical’ peers. Here they can explore a variety of textures, using
1139 paint, shaving cream, clay, or glue with dried goods like beans and pasta shells when
1154 creating their art. They should have the chance to create pictures and describe them to
1167 others. People with autism are often ‘visual’ thinkers and learners. Many children with
1181 autism enjoy drawing, and they can use their drawings to communicate their likes and
1182 wants.

1195 There are many more techniques teachers and parents can use to help children
1207 with autism improve their social, communication, and academic skills. They can make
1225 good use of travel time by reading with, or talking with the child in the car. Families can
1242 carry toys and activities with them when they are out of the house, at the doctor’s office,
1257 or at a restaurant. These games might include picture flash cards, mini board games, and

1273 puzzles. Note that this does not include the use of video games, which only serve to
1286 restrict social interaction and speech with others, which are what children with autism
1288 need most.

1300 Establishing daily routines and following them (like doing chores and keeping a
1313 calendar) can lower a child’s anxiety level and increase participation in activities at
1328 school and home. Children with autism often act out when faced with a surprise of
1341 change in routine. Helping children cope with these changes is important, but requires
1354 tremendous patience on the part of the caregivers. Knowing what activities are upcoming
1369 helps a child with autism mentally prepare him or herself. Teachers and parents can help
1384 find ‘playbuddies’ and ‘studybuddies’ for their children and make sure they have a lot of
1398 time to be together. Teaching with manipulatives like Lego™ and other toys fosters the
1412 imagination. A good prompt to promote communication is to ask the child to ‘describe’
1425 the building product or scene with characters she has set up. Taking swimming lessons
1438 has proven to help children with autism gain self confidence and become more
1449 comfortable with water, touch, and unusual textures. Self confidence and independence
1466 can also increase as children learn how to ride a bike, ride a horse, skate, or learn
1471 tumbling or martial arts moves.

1485 Using plastic props to pretend they are running a store, a school, or a medical
1499 clinic can help children with autism take part in group dramatic play activities and
1511 improve their communication. Getting down on the floor with children with autism,
1526 making efforts to gain eye contact and initiate conversation, as outlined in the writings of
1539 psychologist, Dr. Stanley Greenspan, has also proven effective. Here, adults get down to
1558 floor level, one on one, and help the child to focus on the adult and the task before him.

1571 This could include naming objects, choosing among objects based on a question like,
1587 “Which animal has a shell and can swim?” This is sustained time, repeated, ideally on a
1600 daily basis, that children with autism recognize as time dedicated to communicating their
1601 learning.

1614 Another pioneer in developing methods to help children with autism is an adult
1628 who was born with autism himself. Ruan Kauffman, the original focus of the Son-Rise™
1640 program was taught from early childhood with dedicated techniques developed by his
1653 parents to emerge from his confining autistic world. Basically, in the Son-Rise™
1667 program, a windowless room with little visual stimulation is first used where the child
1683 learns to focus on a family member or therapist. The child is encouraged to use whatever
1701 language he or she has to get needs met. This includes getting the adult to retrieve a toy
1717 down from a high shelf, share in imaginative play with a stuffed animal, make silly facial
1730 expressions, talk about Thomas the Train™, or whatever the child wants. Once some
1743 interaction with the adult is achieved, the adult responds with positive reinforcement, and
1759 gradually seeks to get the child to extend the activity or begin to follow the adult’s
1775 prompt for further communication or play. In this way, the child begins to trust the adult,
1787 follow social cues like conversational turn-taking, head nodding, smiling, and sharing.
1802 Little by little, the child can begin to interact with other people, showing what activities
1816 interest him, including playing with age-group peers, using these same skills. Once this
1829 happens with regularity within the confined space, the child can begin to function
1842 successfully with others, trained or untrained, in the real world of school, stores,
1855 restaurants, hospitals, amusement parks, at a sporting event, or other places in the
1856 community.

1872 What can these peers do to help a child with autism? They can make eye contact
1888 and smile. They can talk together about what interests the child. If the child with autism
1903 cannot yet speak, the typical peer can point at objects, use the Picture Exchange System
1917 (P.E.C.s), or use sign language gestures to communicate. Age group peers can make an
1933 effort to always include a peer with autism in their clique. Adults can help to foster these
1946 relationships, meaning teachers and parents can try to group kids together for playdates
1859 and schoolwork. Having patience and a positive attitude while socializing with a child
1873 can lead to many positive outcomes. With the right people using the right approaches,
1886 children with autism often can be nurtured to become the most friendly, affectionate,
1894 positive, and social people you will ever meet.

1895 **Conclusion**

1908 Really, there is no ‘conclusion’ to the commitment of assisting in the social
1922 growth and development of a child with autism. This is an ongoing, never-ending
1935 dedication to helping the child grow into a happy, social, successful, independent adult.
1949 The early intervention methods discussed here begin with the diagnosis of autism in a
1961 toddler and continue through consistent, creative support in the elementary years. Next
1974 will come the middle school and high school years, with puberty and awkwardness
1988 arriving along the way. Every new experience that approaches is a challenge and a
2000 potential learning experience that the child should be prepared for, whenever possible.
2015 Every difficulty or failure becomes an opportunity to learn to do better next time. This
2031 includes the child, the parents, and other adults the child knows. Much of the learning of
2046 children with autism is aided by repetition, until the skill is mastered. People who work

2061 with the child should expect plenty of bumps and some unforgettable high points on this
2074 journey, ideally with a community of supporters eager to cheer the child on.

2087 Ruan Kauffman, the child of the Son-Rise™ program mentioned earlier, was at
2103 one time, a child who was diagnosed with autism, who grew into a college graduate of
2116 Brown University, and later became a best-selling author and engaging public speaker.
2128 His own experiences and early intervention advocacy have influenced millions of parents
2143 and teachers of children with autism, and led to outstanding results for their children and
2154 students. What Raun's parents, therapists, and teachers attained shows what early
2165 intervention, research, insight, patience, and dedication can achieve. More and more
2176 children diagnosed with autism today are making strides forward and realizing
2191 achievements as Raun did, that years ago were not thought of as possible. With early
2201 intervention, children diagnosed with autism can have a bright future.

Henry Anker and his wife Barbara are public school teachers and parents of a college student with autism who realized great success using the methods presented here. Ms. Anker is a teacher of elementary students with autism. Mr. Anker is also an educational technology web site author.

Work Cited

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