

What is Autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disorder that typically appears during the first three years of life. It was first identified in 1943 by Leo Kanner an American Psychiatrist who identified patterns of behaviour in a group of children he was observing. He used the term '*early infantile autism*'. It affects an estimated 2-5 of every 10,000 people. It is 4 times more prevalent in males than females and is found in individuals of all racial and social backgrounds.

There are no medical tests to assess for Autism, diagnosis is characterised by the 'Triad of Impairments' however, tests may be requested to rule out other possible causes for the behaviours that are being observed.

Autism affects normal brain development and is characterised by difficulties around areas of communication (verbal and non-verbal) flexibility of thought and behaviour (imagination) and social interaction known as 'Triad of Impairments' as identified by Wing and Gould (1979).

As a result of these impairments, individuals find it difficult to communicate with and relate to others or the environment around them. Communication difficulties may vary greatly, some young people may develop language though it may be echolalic (repeats words / phrases) others may interpret language literally so it is important to avoid terms that are sarcastic, use the correct terms / names for objects and give only the information that is needed. Communication however is more than just about words, it includes non-verbal signals, such as body language, facial expressions and tone of voice etc plus picking up clues from others.

Individuals with Autism often see the world as black or white and like set rules or routines. As a consequence they may engage in repetitive activities that are predictable and safe such as repetitive body movements, or develop an attachment to specific objects. Their play may lack imagination such as, lining up objects, engaging in the same games or watching the same video.

Should their routines change and become unfamiliar the individual may become quite anxious this anxiety may be shown in a variety of ways including self-injurious behaviour or aggression. Change should be encouraged as the world can be a very unpredictable place to be, however planned change should be prepared for so that the individual can anticipate it.

IN the years since Kanner's original paper, Autism is probably one of the most widely researched syndromes. However, questions outnumber answers and answers tend to raise more questions.

The terms Kanner Autism or Classic Autism today can often be used to describe individuals who may have an additional learning disability such as an IQ below 70.

Research has also identified several features that individuals may also experience alongside the Triad of Impairments such as:

- Hypo / hyper-sensitivity in their five senses, sight, touch, taste, smell or hearing.
- Difficulties with motor skills – individuals can often be described as clumsy or have difficulty with fine motor tasks such as doing buttons or gross motor skills such as sport / games. Some people may receive a dual diagnosis of Dyspraxia.
- Special interests – an individual may become so attached to a specific hobby or activity that they develop great skills at it. Those who have verbal skills may be able to talk continuously about this chosen subject that fascinates them.
- Savant skills – this refers to the development of an extraordinary talent over and above a special interest in a specific area (maths calculations, memory skills, art or music) this can often be in contrast to their overall abilities. About 10% of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder have savant skills in contrast to the general population though it is unclear why this is.
- Co-existence with other disabilities such as epilepsy.