

Autism spectrum disorders

Autism spectrum disorders (most popular term for pervasive developmental disorders - **F84.0**) Includes disintegrative disorder, Asperger syndrome, Rett syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified. These disorders have a range of severity. (Clinical term: Childhood autism Eu84.0)

Presenting complaints

Children present in childhood with difficulties in socializing, communication and behaviour. Communication difficulties are often the first cause for concern.

Differential diagnosis and co-existing conditions

- The behaviours are not better explained by another psychiatric disorder (notably Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder - F90) or specific developmental disorder of receptive language, deafness or Learning disability - F70.
- It is important to exclude identifiable causes, particularly chromosomal abnormalities, the fragile X syndrome and tuberous sclerosis.

Some three-quarters of children with core autism have a performance IQ below the normal range.

- One-third of children with autism develop epilepsy, often in adolescence or early adult life. The possibility of epilepsy should be carefully investigated.

Essential information for patient and family

- Obtaining a correct diagnosis can be an important step in managing a child's developmental problems and planning for the future. Previously inexplicable behaviours may be seen to be part of a pattern of difficulties.
- Your child will need ongoing support and will benefit from the involvement of a wide network of professionals.
- Individuals with autism or Asperger syndrome often make significant developmental gains well into adult life, but they do not grow out of their difficulties.
- Playing to the individual's strengths and minimizing situations that require sophisticated social skills are important aspects of maximizing an individual's functioning and satisfaction.
- Some will need life-long supervision and care, while others can achieve greater levels of independence.
- Advice and support can be provided through your local National Autistic Society group.

General management and advice to patient and family

- The child's educational placement is a crucial element in ensuring the child's potential is maximised.
- The optimal provision should be decided on an individual basis following a full assessment, and taking into account the severity of the child's difficulties, their overall level of intelligence and their language abilities.

- Children may be best placed in a specialist school for children with autism or in a unit for children with autism or communication difficulties within a mainstream or special school. Higher functioning children may benefit from education in mainstream school, although they usually need additional help and support.
- Affected children generally need explicit teaching about social conventions and guidance and feedback on appropriate ways of interacting with others. Break times and lunchtimes can be particularly difficult for children in mainstream schools, who are vulnerable to bullying.
- At home, parents should complement the behavioural and teaching strategies of teachers, speech therapists and other professionals. However, the behaviour of children with autism can vary substantially across different environments and parents might need advice and help to deal with particularly problematic behaviours at home, for example sleep problems, feeding difficulties with rigid adherence to certain foods, difficulty with change in routines. There is evidence that parents can manage these behaviours successfully using parent training approaches (ref 248).

References

248 Diggle T, McConachie HR, Randle VRL. Parent-mediated early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorder (Cochrane Review). In: The Cochrane Library, Issue 2, 2003. Oxford: Update Software. Two studies were analysed. There is some evidence that parent training might provide benefits to both children and parents. However, large-scale randomized controlled trials are needed, to involve both short- and long-term outcome information, to evaluate for which children parent-mediated early intervention might be most beneficial, and to include economic evaluations.

Medication

There is only a limited role for medication in the management of children with autism, although it can sometimes be a useful adjunct to behavioural treatments of sleep and behaviour difficulties.

Those who develop epilepsy may require anticonvulsant medication.

Liaison and referral

There should be liaison with Education Services, including Educational psychology and any specialist autism teaching support teams. Community paediatricians and speech therapists will also be involved in most cases. Clinical psychologists and child psychiatrists can provide parents with expert advice on the management of behavioural problems. Social Services can, depending on need, provide help in the home and advice on attendance and disability allowances. Respite care can be an important component of the management of children with autism.

Resources for patients and families

The National Autistic Society (Office: 020 7833 2299; Helpline: 020 7903 3555)

Email: nas@nas.org.uk; website: http://www.oneworld.org/autism_uk

Information service, national diagnostic and assessment service, supported employment scheme, local groups and other services.

The Mental Health Foundation produces the information booklet All About Autistic Spectrum

Disorders. Publications, The Mental Health Foundation, 7th Floor, 83 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0HW; tel: 020 7802 0304; website: <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>

Why Does Chris Do That? by Tony Atwood. The National Autistic Society, 1993 (revised reprint 2002); website: http://www.oneworld.org/autism_uk

The Autistic Spectrum: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Judith Gould. Constable and Robinson, 1996 (paperback published 2002)

It Can Get Better... Dealing with Common Behaviour Problems in Young Autistic Children by Paul Dickinson and Liz Hannah. The National Autistic Society, 1998; website: http://www.oneworld.org/autism_uk

Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Tony Atwood. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998