

Portuguese Association for Developmental Disorders and Autism

On December 18, 2007, the United Nations' General Assembly designated April 2nd as "World Autism Awareness Day" to be commemorated annually beginning in 2008.

The Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism is a lifelong, neuro-biological developmental disorder. It is often called a developmental disorder because it normally begins before age 3 during the critical period of child development and because it causes problems or delays with many aptitudes that arise from childhood throughout adulthood.

There are a series of signs (symptoms) of autism that parents, guardians, family members, teachers or other people who spend a great deal of time with children can observe.

Currently, there isn't a single, definitive treatment for autism. Overall, there exists a variety of ways to minimize symptoms and maximize learning. People with autism have a greater likelihood of utilizing all their individual aptitudes and abilities if they receive behavioral and educational therapies.

What is Autism

The principal signs and symptoms of autism involve language, social conduct and behavior with respect to objects and routines:

Communication – verbal or non-verbal (absence of pointing, visual contact or smiling);

Social Interaction – emotional expression, understanding of how others think (empathy) and ability to maintain a conversation, as well as time spent interacting with others;

Routines or Repetitive Behaviors – often called stereotypical behaviors such as the repetition of words and actions, obsessive adherence to routines and schedules, playing with objects in a repetitive manner and, often times, an inappropriate way of organizing and arranging objects.

People with autism can have difficulty speaking, or may not make eye contact with the person with whom they are speaking. They may have to arrange their pencils before being able to concentrate or they may have to repeat the same phrase numerous times in order to calm themselves down. They may flail their arms to express happiness or hurt themselves to express discontentment. Some people with autism never learn how to speak. These behaviors not only challenge the lives of individuals with autism, but also that of family members, care-takers, teachers and all those that come in contact with them.

Possible Signs of Autism

- The child doesn't respond to his/her name.
- The child is unable to explain what he/she wants.
- The child's linguistic abilities are developing slowly.
- The child doesn't follow directions.
- The child may appear to be deaf.
- The child appears to hear on selective occasions, but not others.
- The child doesn't point or wave good-bye.
- The child used to say certain word or sounds but has stopped doing so.
- The child has extremely agitated or violent episodes.
- The child has strange patterns of movement.
- The child is overactive, non-cooperative or resistant.
- The child doesn't know how to play with toys.
- The child doesn't smile back at others.
- The child spends too much time doing the same thing and doesn't move on to other activities.
- The child seems to prefer playing alone.
- The child seems to be in his or her "own world".
- The child seems to exclude others.
- The child doesn't have any interest in other children.
- The child walks on his/her tip-toes.
- The child demonstrates an unusual connection to toys, objects (especially hard, as opposed to soft, objects) or schedules/routines (must always put on socks before pants).