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Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism is a complex developmental disability that affects the person's ability to socially relate to others, communicate and problem solve. It is a neurological disorder that typically appears by the age of three and lasts a lifetime.

What Are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Autism is one of a group of disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). These disorders are marked by substantial impairments in the three core areas of social relatedness, verbal and non-verbal communication and rigid, repetitive and restricted patterns of behaviors and interests. Many people with an ASD may also have difficulty with emotional regulation, cognitive impairment, motor and sensory disorders. There are five subcategories of ASD: Autistic Disorder; Asperger's Syndrome; Rett's Syndrome; Childhood Disintegrative Disorder; and Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified. Each subcategory has specific diagnostic criteria which are described in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR).

What Are Some Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders?

As a spectrum disorder, ASD affects each individual differently and in varying degrees. The characteristics may also change over time. Challenges must be observed in each of the three core areas to be considered as having an ASD. A child may exhibit some or all of the following characteristics:

- various levels of delayed communication including impaired language acquisition and comprehension.
- difficulties or differences in understanding social situations and/or relationships.

- responses to sensory information that are unusual, inconsistent, repetitive or unconventional.
- stereotypic or repetitive patterns of behavior; persistent preoccupation with or attachment to objects.
- difficulties in adjusting to change in routines, environments, activities and/or schedules.
- difficulties in abstract thinking involving awareness, judgment and generalization.
- uneven developmental patterns in the acquisition of motor, sensory, social, play or learning skills.

What Causes Autism?

The actual causes of autism are still unknown. However, researchers do know that autism is a brain disorder, usually present from birth, which affects the way the brain processes information related to language, memory, thinking and the senses. Autism is not a form of mental illness. It is not caused by parenting style or by any other psychological influences in the child's life. Difficult behaviors in children with autism are often due to frustration or misunderstanding caused by communication, social and/or sensory problems.

What Is The Federal Definition of Autism?

300.8 (c) (1) The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) defines autism as "a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and non-verbal communication, and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental changes or changes in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

(i) Autism does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance.

(ii) A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three could be identified as having autism if the criteria in paragraph (c)(1)(i) of this section are satisfied.

What Is Colorado's Educational Eligibility Criteria?

In the Colorado rules, autism is listed as a physical disability. School districts may use the criteria in the IDEA 2004 definition of autism to determine if a child is eligible for special education services. When a school district makes this determination, it is an educational identification only and should not be confused with a diagnosis, which can only be done by a doctor. The term "autism" includes all five subcategories of autism spectrum disorders. While parents may choose to seek a medical evaluation, it is not required for the IEP team to determine educational eligibility and start special education services.

What Can Families Do If They Have Concerns?

Parents who have concerns about their child's development should seek the advice of their pediatrician or physician. A physical exam and developmental assessment as well as a thorough developmental and family history may provide important information when making an educational identification of autism. For children birth through five, parents should request an evaluation by contacting their school district's Child Find Coordinator. For evaluation of a school age child, begin by contacting your child's teacher, principal or Special Education Department.

Does A Child Qualify For Services If They Have A Medical Diagnosis?

Students with a clinical diagnosis of an ASD or any disability do not automatically qualify for special education. Information from several sources must be considered in the determination of an educational disability and a clinical diagnosis may be one source. An IEP (Individualized Education Program) team must determine if the student meets the eligibility requirements for special education. Many children with special needs who do not qualify for special education are eligible for accommodations

under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. See the Fast Facts – "The Role of Clinical Diagnosis in the Educational Identification of Disabilities".

Does CDE Recommend Specific Methodologies or Interventions?

The Colorado Department of Education encourages collaborative partnerships with families and professionals to address the widely varying needs of children and youth with autism spectrum disorders. CDE does not endorse any one specific program or methodology. In order to meet the diverse needs of each student in a district, knowledge of current research-based or evidenced-based strategies and interventions are necessary in order to develop an individualized education program that meets the each student's unique educational needs.

Information/Resources/Website

Colorado Department of Education
Exceptional Student Leadership Unit
201 E. Colfax Ave. #300, Denver, CO 80203
303 866-6694
www.cde.state.co.us

Autism Society of America
301 657-0881
www.autism-society.org

Autism Society of Colorado
720 214-0794 Office
www.autismcolorado.org

Autism Society of America of the Pike Peak Region
719 216-7175
www.asappr.org

Autism Society of Boulder
720 272-8231
www.autismboulder.org

Autism Society of Larimer County
970 377-9640
www.autismlarimer.org

PEAK Parent Center
719 531-9400
www.peakparent.org

Center for the Study of Autism, www.autism.org
Autism Speaks, www.autismspeaks.org