

# What is autism?

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Although it was first identified in 1943, autism is still a relatively unknown disability. Yet autistic spectrum disorders are estimated to touch the lives of over 600,000 families throughout the UK.

People with autism are not physically disabled in the same way that a person with cerebral palsy may be; they do not require wheelchairs and they 'look' just like anybody without the disability. Due to this invisible nature it can be much harder to create awareness and understanding of the condition.

Because an autistic child looks 'normal' others assume they are naughty or the parents are not controlling the child. Strangers frequently comment on this 'failing'.

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## What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. Children and adults with autism have difficulties with everyday social interaction. Their ability to develop friendships is generally limited as is their capacity to understand other people's emotional expression.

People with autism can often have accompanying learning disabilities but everyone with the condition shares a difficulty in making sense of the world.

There is also a condition called Asperger syndrome, which is a form of autism used to describe people who are usually at the higher functioning end of the autistic spectrum.

"Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything."

- A person with autism

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## What are the characteristics of autism?

People with autism generally experience three main areas of difficulty; these are known as the triad of impairments.

- **Social interaction** (difficulty with social relationships, for example appearing aloof and indifferent to other people)
- **Social communication** (difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication, for example not fully understanding the meaning of common gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice)
- **Imagination** (difficulty in the development of interpersonal play and imagination, for example having a limited range of imaginative activities, possibly copied and pursued rigidly and repetitively).

In addition to this triad, repetitive behaviour patterns and resistance to change in routine are often characteristic.

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## What causes autism?

The exact cause or causes of autism is/are still not known but research shows that genetic factors are important. It is also evident from research that autism may be associated with a variety of conditions affecting brain development which occur before, during, or very soon after birth.

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## Diagnosis

The earlier a diagnosis of autism is made, the better the chances are of a person receiving appropriate help and support.

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## Can people with autism be helped?

Specialist education and structured support can really make a difference to the life of a person with autism, helping to maximise skills and achieve full potential in adulthood.