

## Autism

By Matthew Doll, PhD, Doll & Associates

**What is a “Medical Diagnosis” of Autism?** The diagnosis of any disorder in a child can be a devastating event for parents. We tend to think in medical terms, if we can find out what is wrong then we can “fix it.” It is even harder when we know that there is “something wrong” with our child but don’t know what it is. Many parents have turned to the Internet and are familiar with the symptoms and signs of a variety of disorders and look to professionals to confirm or dispute their assumptions.

When concerns are related to symptoms of Autism the need to “get the diagnosis” is accelerated as parents are keenly aware that the earlier that intervention is started, more positive outcomes are possible. They also know that there is a “wait list” for intensive services that they can’t get on – until they have the diagnosis.

Autism is a neurobiological disorder that inhibits a person’s ability to communicate and develop social relationships, and is often accompanied by behavioral challenges. It is diagnosed in one in 110 children in the United States, and affects four times as many boys as girls. Because autism is a spectrum disorder (showing varied symptoms from severe and profound to mild) it can present differently in different individu-

als. “If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism.” It is important to note that the educational system has different criteria (e.g. impact on learning). They will conduct a multidisciplinary evaluation and determine if a child qualifies for “Educational Autism.”

**What are those early signs?** Autism-Speaks.org references the following as “red flags” that a child should be immediately evaluated.

- *No big smiles or other warm, joyful expressions by six months or thereafter*
- *No back-and-forth sharing of sounds, smiles, or other facial expressions by nine months or thereafter*
- *No babbling by 12 months*
- *No back-and-forth gestures, such as pointing, showing, reaching or waving by 12 months*
- *No words by 16 months*
- *No two-word meaningful phrases (without imitating or repeating) by 24 months*
- *Any loss of speech or babbling or social skills at any age*

As you can see most of the red flags are about communication and shared attention (the ability to focus on the same thing with another). For children

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### Agnesian HealthCare Behavioral Health Services

#### St. Agnes Hospital

430 E. Division Street  
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin 54935  
(920) 926-4205

#### Doll & Associates

40 Camelot Drive  
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin 54935  
(920) 907-8201

#### Psychiatric Associates

200 Front Street, Suite 3D  
Beaver Dam, Wisconsin 53916  
(920) 885-2780

[agnesian.com](http://agnesian.com)

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that do have communicative skills but still demonstrate areas of concern, early identification may be even more difficult. Children considered as having High-Functioning Autism (eventually develop good verbal communication skills) or Asperger's Syndrome (symptoms of autism but no verbal language delay) may not have been so obvious in early childhood. Whenever you have a concern about your child's development it is important to seek professional consultation, first with the child's primary care physician, who then may refer you on for further evaluation if needed.

***Who should evaluate for autism?***

Evaluation for autism is a multidisciplinary affair for many important reasons. Significant sensory issues require an occupational therapist (read "The Out of Synch Child"); medical and genetic issues require a physician; social, cognitive, emotional and behavioral difficulties require a psychologist; receptive and expressive language issues a speech pathologist; and motor planning and coordination issues a physical therapist.

***Why are so many more children being diagnosed with autism?*** The general consensus is that we are more aware of the symptoms and therefore doing a better job of diagnosing. There also appears to be more children with problems due to a variety of proposed factors (e.g. environmental pollution and age of parents to name a couple of the current suspects, not immunizations – they have been shown in a large study to be safe). Some professionals believe

that many children who had been previously diagnosed as having cognitive delays (mental retardation) are now being diagnosed as autistic. Evaluation of adaptive and intellectual abilities is an important part of the diagnostic process. Someone with a significantly low intelligence may or may not also have features of autism. Given the sometimes limited communication of people with autism, accurate assessment of their intellectual capabilities can be a challenge.

***What is the difference between Disorder and Disability?***

It is important to remember that disorder is a medical term, disability is a legal term. Autism is often considered an "invisible" disorder. No crutches, no wheelchair; just this intense rigid response style and oversensitivity that can lead to monumental meltdowns that teachers, strangers and family may quickly assume are related to poor parenting or a "defiant" child. Children with High-Functioning Autism or Asperger's Syndrome often can appear on the surface to be doing just fine, but really and truly are wired differently. The line between disorder and disability continues to need clarification and further research.

***Where are we going?*** Given that much is still unknown about autism, ongoing research is important. Gathering information about various symptom presentations, such as the Ian Project ([www.ianproject.org](http://www.ianproject.org)), illustrates that if we all work together to describe what symptoms exist with individuals with the disorder, perhaps we can better understand the process behind autism and develop better ways to treat and perhaps one day prevent it.