

## Conley Outreach Community Services



*Caring for the Heart of Community*

A Community Care Team Newsletter

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## Autism Spectrum Disorders



It is estimated that 1 in 88 children have some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. Children with autism and related disorders are often confused in their thinking and generally have difficulty understanding the world around them. Typically symptoms

appear before the child is 3 years old and last throughout life. It is estimated that 1 in 88 children have ASD—a 10-fold increase in prevalence in 40 years. Boys are 4-5 times more likely than girls to have ASD.

### Symptoms of Autism

Children with autism may:

- Avoid eye contact
- Prefer to be alone
- Echo words or phrases
- Have difficulty interacting with others
- Spin objects or self
- Insist on sameness
- Have inappropriate attachments to objects
- Exhibit inappropriate laughing or giggling
- Not want cuddling
- Have difficulty expressing needs
- Have inappropriate response or no response to sound

- Have no real fear of dangers
- Appear insensitive to pain
- Have sustained, unusual or repetitive play; uneven physical or verbal skills.

### Spectrum Disorder

Autism is considered to be a spectrum disorder, with symptoms ranging from very mild (the quirky kid) to severe. Most think of Dustin Hoffman's Rain Man when they think of autism, but many people on the autism spectrum are successfully integrated into our schools and society (and have not been labeled autistic). (cont. p.2)

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### Warning Signs

Babies develop at their own pace, some more quickly than others. However, you should consider an evaluation for autism if :

- Your child does not babble or coo by 12 months of age
- Your child does not gesture (point or wave) by 12 months
- Your child does not say single words by 16 months
- Your child does not say two-word phrases on his or her own (rather than just repeating what someone else says) by 24 months
- Your child has lost any language or social skills (at any age).

## Causes of Autism

The exact cause of autism is not known, but research points to several possible factors. Recent studies strongly suggest that some people have a genetic predisposition to autism. Researchers are looking for clues about which genes contribute to this increased vulnerability. In some children, environmental factors may also play a role. Studies of people with autism have found abnormalities in several regions of the brain, which suggest autism may result from a disruption in early

fetal brain development. There has been recent heated debate about the role childhood vaccines play in causing autism. The medical community maintains that there is no convincing evidence that vaccines cause autism; many parents believe differently. Symptoms of autism generally appear at about 12-18 months, which coincides with the first MMR vaccine.



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## Caring Hearts/Helping Hands

News You Can Use to Change Your Community  
A Community Care Team Newsletter

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### Spectrum Disorder (continued from page 1)

Many highly successful scientists and engineers may have autistic-like characteristics. There is speculation that Mozart, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein may have had mild forms of autism. Milder forms of autism include Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-NOS (Not Otherwise Specified). Autism coupled with mental retardation produces more significant impairment.

#### AREA RESOURCES

DayOne Network (0-2 services) 630/879-2277  
Easter Seals 847/742-3264  
Association for Individual Development  
630/844-5040  
Blazing Prairie Stars (Equine Assisted Therapy)  
630/365-5550  
HorsePower Therapeutic Riding 815/508-0804  
NIU Speech and Hearing Clinic 815/753-1483  
Pfeiffer Treatment Center (biochemical treatments)  
630/505--0300  
Rainbow Center Pediatric Place 630/584-7530  
Little Friends 630/305-4196  
Summit School 847/488-9207  
Camelot School (Naperville) 630/355-0200  
(DeKalb) 815/787-4144  
Fox Valley Special Recreation 630/907-1114

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### Treatment Options

While autism cannot be "cured", it can be successfully treated. Early intervention is key to minimizing the impact autism has on a person's life. Children with autism generally benefit most from a highly structured environment and the use of routines. Treatment for autism usually includes a combination of special education, behavior modification, and therapies (speech, occupational and physical). Written or picture directions are important as many individuals with autism have impaired auditory perception. Reduction in sensory stimuli (flickering florescent lights, loud buzzers) also helps to minimize painful distractions. While there is no medication to treat autism, it may be used to treat specific symptoms, such as anxiety, hyperactivity and self-injurious behavior.



## Diagnosing Autism



If a child exhibits autism symptoms, his pediatrician or primary care doctor will conduct a full medical history and physical exam. Although there are no laboratory tests for diagnosing autism, the doctor may use various tests (blood and hearing tests, X-rays) to rule out a physical disorder.

If no physical disorder is found, the child may be referred to a specialist in childhood developmental disorders trained to diagnose or treat autism. This specialist will base a diagnosis on the child's level of development, and observation of speech and behavior, including his/her play and ability to socialize with others. The specialist often gathers input from the child's parents, teachers and other adults familiar with the child's symptoms.