



## “Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Autism Spectrum Disorder

### What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological (brain-based) disorder that affects the development of social and communication abilities, as well as other aspects of behaviour, in characteristic ways. The term "autism spectrum disorder" (ASD) reflects the current view that the impact of ASD on learning and behaviour can range from relatively mild to severe in any or all of these areas of development. For example, although some people with ASD also have an intellectual disability, the pattern of social and behavioural differences that defines ASD can co-exist with all levels of intellect. People with ASD face challenges in understanding and relating to other people in typical reciprocal ways. Although they may be interested in social interactions and relationships, they may lack a natural grasp of some of the necessary interpersonal skills, such as the ability to take another person's point of view (empathy). Difficulties with language may make it harder for some people with ASD to express their ideas, or to understand others' complex spoken ideas. However, even when a person with ASD has good language skills, other differences in their communication abilities may affect social situations. For example, they might not be able to begin a conversation or to keep one going in a typically fluent, two-sided manner. People with ASD also tend to have repetitive or inflexible patterns of thinking and behaviour. Their interests and activities may be narrow, unusual and /or more intense than those of others. Long-term outcomes vary widely for persons with ASD. Some individuals attain academic and vocational success, as well as independent living, especially as our communities become more accepting of social differences. Vulnerability to mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression remains an issue for many of these otherwise able adults with ASD.

Research shows that ASD is a genetic disorder, but the specific causes are not yet known. The risk of developing ASD is increased for children born to families who already have a diagnosed family member, and more boys /men than girls / women are affected by ASD. ASD is a life-long condition that is usually recognized in more severe forms by age 2 or 3 years – often at this age because the child is not yet speaking and shows little interest in people. However, more subtle signs of ASD may not be recognized until much later, often when the child enters school and their differences from their peers become more obvious.

### How is ASD diagnosed?

ASD is diagnosed by an experienced clinician (usually a clinical child psychologist or a specialist physician) based on patterns of behaviour. There is no medical test for ASD. The diagnosis is made by gathering in-depth information from parents and others about specific aspects of the individual's development and behaviour, and by making systematic direct observations of behaviour -- both what the person *does* that may be unusual, and *doesn't* do that would be expected of a typically-developing individual at that age.



With earlier recognition in young children and a better understanding of both milder and more severe forms in people of all ages, the diagnosis of ASD is becoming far more common. Recent estimates from around the world suggest that at least 1 in every 100 children is affected. The impact of ASD varies, but can be overwhelming for families, as well as for the health, education and community services that support them. Many communities are trying to keep pace with the increasing need for ASD services.

## What do we do about ASD? Can Psychology help?

Outcomes for many people with ASD are far more positive than in past decades. Advances in psychological research have improved our understanding of the fundamental challenges faced by people with ASD. Many psychologists have contributed to improved methods of recognizing, assessing, and treating ASD. Psychological assessment of children’s ability profiles – areas of relative strength and weakness – can guide the development of appropriate programs for children with ASD, and treatments based on psychological principles are at the leading edge of autism intervention.

Early intensive intervention based on the scientifically derived principles of learning (Applied Behaviour Analysis, or ABA) can help children with ASD when used within a comprehensive, individualized treatment program. Key areas for intervention usually include communication and social skills, daily living skills, self-regulation or coping skills, and family support. A variety of other psychological interventions may be integrated with ABA-based techniques to meet an individual’s needs. These include incidental teaching and other strategies (such as pivotal response treatment) that capitalize on teaching opportunities that naturally arise in the home and community. Structured teaching approaches emphasize organizing the person’s environment (schedules, materials and settings) to optimize learning and functioning. Peer-mediated interventions, in which other children are taught effective ways to interact with a child with ASD, can promote more positive social opportunities. For older and more able individuals with ASD, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) strategies can be modified to help manage the anxiety that is common in ASD. CBT involves teaching individuals how to change the way they think, and to use systematic relaxation techniques, in the specific situations that provoke their anxiety. Evidence –based treatment for the mental health needs of adults with ASD may be particularly hard to find. Psychologists and other mental health professionals who understand ASD can modify programs developed for younger individuals, or for other disorders, to customize treatment when ASD-specific services are lacking.

## Where can I get more information?

- Autism Society Canada, <http://www.autismsocietycanada.ca>
  - and affiliated provincial organizations
- Autism Speaks Canada, <http://www.autismspeaks.ca>
  - See especially ‘Toolkits’
- National Autistic Society (UK), <http://www.autism.org.uk>
- Provincial associations of psychology: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>
- Psychology Foundation of Canada: <http://www.psychologyfoundation.org>
- American Psychological Association (APA): <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter>



**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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