



# Disability Awareness Begins With You:

## *AUTISM/Pervasive Developmental Disorder*

Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-NOS (not otherwise specified) are developmental disabilities that share many of the same characteristics. Usually evident by age three, autism and PDD-NOS are neurological disorders that affect a child's ability to communicate, understand language, play, and relate to others.

Autistic disorder is one of the disabilities specifically defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal legislation under which children and youth with disabilities receive special education and related services. IDEA defines the disorder as "a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and non verbal communication and social interaction, usually 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 change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences."

Due to the similarity of behaviors associated with autism and PDD, use of the term pervasive developmental disorder has caused some confusion among parents and professionals. However, the treatment and educational needs are similar for both diagnoses.

Autism and PDD occur in approximately 5 to 15 per 10,000 births. These disorders are four times more common in boys than in girls.

The causes of autism and PDD are unknown. Currently, researchers are investigating areas such as neurological damage and biochemical imbalance in the

brain. These disorders are not caused by psychological factors.

Some or all of the following characteristics may be observed in mild to severe forms:

- Communication problems (using and understanding language)
- Difficulty relating to people, objects, and events
- Unusual play with toys and other objects
- Difficulty with changes in routine or familiar surroundings
- Repetitive body movements or behavior patterns

Children with autism or PDD vary widely in abilities, intelligence, and behaviors. Some children do not speak; others have language that often includes repeated phrases or conversations. Repetitive play skills, a limited range of interests, and impaired social skills are generally evident. Unusual responses to sensory information are also common.

Early diagnosis and appropriate educational programs are very important to children with autism or PDD. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes autism as a disability category. From the age of three, children with autism and PDD are eligible for an educational program appropriate to their individual needs. Educational programs for students with autism or PDD focus on improving communication, social, academic, behavioral, and daily living skills. Behavior and communication problems that interfere with learning sometimes require the assistance of a

knowledgeable professional in the autism field who develops and helps to implement a plan which can be carried out at home and school.

The classroom environment should be structured so that the program is consistent and predictable. Students with autism or PDD learn better and are less confused when information is presented visually as well as verbally. Interaction with non-disabled peers is also important, for those students provide models of appropriate language, social, and behavioral skills. To overcome frequent problems in generalizing skills learned at school, it is very important to develop programs with parents, so that learning activities, experiences, and approaches can be carried over into the home and community.

With educational programs designed to meet a student's individual needs and specialized adult support services in employment and living arrangements, children and adults with autism or PDD can live and work in the community.

Excerpted from NICHCY Disability Fact Sheet, No. 1 January 2004, National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org); 1-800-695-0285

### RESOURCES

Autism Hotline  
Autism Services Center  
304-525-8014  
[www.autismservicescenter.org](http://www.autismservicescenter.org)

Autism Society of America  
301-657-0881 1-800-328-8476  
[info@autism-society.org](mailto:info@autism-society.org)  
[www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)

Autism Center  
Center on Human Development and Disability/  
University of Washington  
206-221-6806  
[Http://depts.washington.edu/uwautism/](http://depts.washington.edu/uwautism/)

Council for Exceptional  
Children (CEC)  
703-620-3660 888-232-7733

Cure Autism Now (CAN)  
213-549-0500

Autism Society of Washington  
253-223-8885  
[www.autismsocietyofwa.org](http://www.autismsocietyofwa.org)

FEAT  
Family for Early Autism Treatment Inc  
206-763-3373  
[www.feat.org](http://www.feat.org)

FEPP  
Family Educator Partnership Project  
888-754-8798  
[www.arcwa.org/FEPP](http://www.arcwa.org/FEPP)