

# Autism

## What is it?

Autism is a complex disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. The diagnosis of autism is based on behavioral characteristics presented by the child. It is a life-long neurological disorder manifested by difficulties with social interaction, communication, restricted, repetitive behavior and motor difficulties. Children with autism typically have difficulties and impairment in language, non-verbal communication, social interactions and play.

## What are the symptoms?

People with autism process and respond to information in unique ways. Some individuals are overly sensitive to sounds, smells and textures, while others exhibit sensory under-responsiveness and may not react to excessive sounds, smells and textures. Some individuals may have fine motor skills, especially with pencil and paper activities.

Below is a short questionnaire you can use to see if your child exhibits autism behavior –

A total of six (or more) items from 1, 2 and 3 with two from 1 and at least one each from 2 and 3.

1. Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
  - a. Marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors, such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body posture and gestures to regulate social interaction
  - b. Failure to develop peer relationships
  - c. Lack of a spontaneous desire to seek to share enjoyment, interests or achievements with others
  - d. Lack of social or emotional reciprocity
  
2. Qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:
  - a. Delay or lack of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
  - b. In individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain conversation
  - c. Stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
  - d. Lack of varied, spontaneous, make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level
  
3. Restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities as manifested by at least one of the following:
  - a. Encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
  - b. Apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
  - c. Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms
  - d. Persistent preoccupation with parts of objects

For children with autism, sensory integration problems are common. For most of us, sensory integration helps us understand what we are experiencing. Think about what it is like to eat a ripe peach. Your sense of touch, smell and taste work together to define this experience; the feel of the peach fuzz; the sweet smell of the nectar; the texture, taste, and juices running down your face as you take a bite.

Children with autism senses may be over- or under-active. The fuzz on the peach may be painful to the touch; the taste may make the child gag. Some children with autism are particularly sensitive to sound, finding even the most ordinary daily noises painful. Many professionals feel that some of the typical behaviors that are associated with autism are a result of sensory processing and integration difficulties.

### **How is it treated?**

Unlike many practices, the Pediatric Therapy Center (PTC) provides a “team” approach when working with your child. Many disorders require both a speech pathologist and an occupational therapist to treat a problem. PTC therapists work hard to coordinate your child’s care. The therapy sessions are 50 minutes in duration compared to other therapy practices at 30 minutes per session. PTC therapists believe that the “functional” skills are of high importance.

PTC therapists focus on developing the occupations of daily life such as writing, eating, dressing, and grooming. They also evaluate functional skills and teach adaptive activities towards self-care; some specialize in children with impaired motor and sensory functions.

Another important aspect of therapy is the development of social skills. Children with Autism usually have difficulty in relating to their peers. Unexpected changes in a peer’s behavior can greatly disrupt a child with autism.

Since children with autism are characterized as having disorders in sensory processing, using sensory integration principles is a logical treatment. Treatment will address areas such as modulation of sensory input to improve attention, organization of behaviors and motor planning. In addition, attainment of self help skills for independence in activities of daily living, social interactions and appropriate play.

If a child with autism also presents with neuromuscular issues then the defects in strength, postural control and balance will also be addressed in occupational therapy.