

Autism for Family Members

What is Autism?



Competencies for this module are:

As a result of completion of this module, the participant will be able to:

- Define Autism
- Explain what is meant by a “spectrum” disorder

What is Autism?



Autism

Autism is a physical disorder of the brain that impairs the way sensory input is assimilated. This disorder causes problems in communication and social behavior, irregularities in learning, and greatly affects the way your family member relates to others and the world around him/her. It is referred to as a [pervasive developmental disorder](#) because it impacts all areas of functioning (pervasive) and originates early in life (developmental).

What is Autism?



A Spectrum Disorder

The symptoms and characteristics of Autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations, from mild to severe. Although Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, your family member can exhibit any combination of the behaviors in any degree of severity. Two people, both with the same diagnosis, can act very differently from one another and have varying skills (Autism Society of America, 2004).

Quiz 1

Question 1 of 2

Point Value: 10

This is a MULTIPLE CHOICE question. Answer the following question by selecting the ONE correct answer from the list below.

Autism is a spectrum disorder because...

- It causes visual disturbances that affect the visible color spectrum
- The symptoms and characteristics can vary from mild to severe
- Two people with very different diagnoses will act similar to one another
- Most people display the similar symptoms and characteristics

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Prevalence



Prevalence



Competencies for this module are:

As a result of completion of this module, the participant will be able to:

- Identify the prevalence of Autism
- List some common beliefs about why Autism is more prevalent today than in the past

Prevalence



Current Prevalence

The current prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders is generally accepted as one person in every 150 births in the United States. As high as this sounds, in some counties it is estimated to be even higher. The United Kingdom has estimates as high as one in every 60 births, while other countries such as New Zealand and Australia estimate one in every one hundred children are affected. These continuously researched and debated numbers have grown considerably over the last ten years to what some describe as an epidemic.

Prevalence



Current Prevalence (continued)

In the United States, this translates to as many as 1.5 million Americans who may have some form of Autism, including milder variants, and the number is rising.

[Epidemiologists](#) estimate the number of people with Autism in the US could reach 4 million in the next decade.

Autism occurs equally in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. However, boys are four times as likely as girls to have Autism

Prevalence



Epidemic

The advent of a possible Autism epidemic has become a concern in many communities and professional groups alike. As the number of reported cases of Autism has increased dramatically over the past decade, members of the medical and scientific community are generally quite skeptical about the increasing numbers as indicators of an [“epidemic”](#).

Some individuals and groups also dispute that any increase in diagnoses be labeled an “epidemic”, as in their opinion, this may imply that Autism is a disease.

Prevalence



Diagnostic Criteria

Some scientists attribute the dramatic rise in Autism rates to more effective and inclusive diagnostic criteria and detection tools, noting that the diagnosis of Autism was only created in the 1940s and that the Autism spectrum concept only entered the mainstream later in the last century.

It is clear, however, that at least some part of the rise in diagnoses is due to increased screening, earlier diagnosis, and better recognition. Changes in diagnostic categories in the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) affect the numbers of people diagnosed with Autism, especially changes set out in DSM-III-R and DSM-IV.

Prevalence



Diagnostic Criteria (continued)

In the 1990s, Autism began to be recognized as occurring in a broad spectrum of severity. In 1994, [Asperger's Syndrome](#) was included in the [DSM-IV](#). Autism Spectrum Disorder is generally thought to include Autism, [PDD-NOS](#), and Asperger's Syndrome.

Prevalence



Increased Incidence or Diagnosis?

While the number of diagnoses related to Autism has increased in recent decades, public health organizations and researchers do not always agree whether there is an actual increase in the incidence of Autism, or whether:

- More incidents of Autism are being reported now, as a result of increased awareness of the disorder;
- The diagnosis is being applied more broadly than before as a result of the changing definition of the disorder; or
- There is ongoing substitution of the “Autism” label for less palatable designations such as mental retardation.

Prevalence



Concerns

Whether the true incidence of Autism had been increasing was unclear as recently as 1999. Nevertheless, an increasing prevalence of Autism diagnoses has sparked concerns, especially among parents, which in turn has led to the initiation of a number of new intervention programs, advocacy groups, and support programs.

In the absence of a universally accepted cause of Autism, many people, such as family members, health professionals, politicians, and educators, are demanding further independent studies into a number of possible causes for the increase in diagnosis.

Quiz 2

Question 1 of 2 ▾

Point Value: 10

This is a WORD BANK question. Press the left-hand button on your mouse and use it to drag the answer you think is correct into the box.

What is the current rate of prevalence of Autism in the United States?

5 in every 150 births

1 in every 150 births

1 in every 1,500 births

10 in every 1,500 births

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What Causes Autism?



What Causes Autism?



Competencies for this module are:

As a result of completion of this module, the participant will be able to:

- Identify the many possible causes of Autism
- Describe the research that is taking place to try to uncover the cause of Autism

What Causes Autism?



Specific Cause

Although a specific cause of Autism is not known, many researchers link the disorder to biological or neurological differences in the brain. In some families, there appears to be a pattern of Autism and/or related disabilities, which suggests a genetic cause. Researchers are attempting to identify irregular segments of [genetic code](#) that a person with Autism may inherit. It is also theorized that some people are born with a higher susceptibility to Autism and a focus of research is on finding that single trigger that leads to the onset of Autism. A third area of genetic study is determining whether clusters of unstable genes result in the onset of Autism.

What Causes Autism?



Environmental Factors

In addition to genetic causes, researchers are investigating the possibility that Autism may also be caused by difficulties during pregnancy or delivery. Environmental factors in areas such as viral infections, exposure to environmental chemicals, and metabolic imbalances are also being investigated as a possible cause of Autism.

There are certain medical conditions in which Autism may occur more frequently than expected. These include untreated [phenylketonuria](#) (PKU), [congenital rubella](#), tubular sclerosis, and [Fragile X](#).

What Causes Autism?



Environmental Factors (continued)

Several older theories about the cause of Autism have been disproved. Autism is not caused by “refrigerator mothers” or bad parenting. Autism is not a mental illness. People with Autism are not unruly and uncooperative by choice. No known psychological factors have been identified as a cause of Autism.

Quiz 3

Question 1 of 2

Point Value: 10

This is a MATCHING DROP-DOWN question. Match the statements to the correct definition by using your mouse to open the selection of answers in the drop-down menu and clicking on your answer choice.

Select which of the statements below is True and which one is False.

We now know what causes Autism

-- Select --

Many researchers link the cause of Autism to biological or neurological differences in the brain

-- Select --

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What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



**Competencies for this module
are:**

As a result of completion of this module, the participant will be able to:

- Define and describe learning characteristics
- Define and describe communication characteristics
- Define and describe social and behavioral characteristics

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Learning Characteristics

The learning characteristics of your family member with Autism differ greatly from those of individuals with other disabilities. While many learning deficits can be [remediated](#) through appropriate education, there may be lifelong challenges you and your family member will face. The following describes some common learning characteristics of people with Autism.

- People with Autism are typically concrete learners. Facts and rote information can be learned quite easily. When information is presented in any level of abstraction, the individual with Autism may struggle to grasp these concepts.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Learning Characteristics (continued)

- Examples of abstract concepts your family member may have difficulty with include making inferences, predictions, explaining emotions, puns, and [idioms](#).
- A typical learning profile for an individual with Autism may be described as “splintered”. Development across domains, such as cognitive, language, social, self-care, and motor, is uneven; that is, your family member may appear at or close to chronological age level for one domain while significant delays are noted in another domain.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Learning Characteristics (continued)

- Difficulty with generalization is a hallmark deficit for individuals with Autism. Information learned in one setting under specific conditions often is not transferred to other settings or different conditions. [Generalization](#) difficulties may be noted across settings, people, and teaching materials. For example, your family member may be able to successfully identify the letters of the alphabet in the school environment but be unable to do this in the home environment with different, or the same, flash cards.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Learning Characteristics (continued)

- People with Autism rely on predictability and routine to understand the world around them. Even simple changes in the environment, such as the seating arrangement of a classroom, could result in extreme distress for your family member with Autism.
- The ability to imitate is a hallmark of basic learning. Many young learners with Autism struggle with simple motor imitation, which then translates to an inability to imitate simple social gestures, play routines, and even word imitation. The natural processing of imitation that is evidenced in typically developing children will not be found in your family member with Autism. This is a skill that must be taught in order to establish basic learning foundation skills.

Quiz 4

Question 1 of 1

Point Value: 10

This is MULTIPLE CHOICE question. Read the scenario below and then complete the following statement by selecting ONE correct answer from the list below.

Johnny is a 4 year old boy with Autism. His learning profile shows very strong reading and math skills. However, he is not toilet trained and has limited fine motor skills.

This is an example of...

- Cognitive Impairment
- Splinter skills
- Compulsive behavior
- Typical learning

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What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Communication Characteristics

Effective communication is essential to the quality of life for all human beings, and as such must be a priority goal for all students with Autism. Most family members of young children with Autism cite lack of language development as their first and primary concern. The following are some communication characteristics found in individuals with Autism.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Communication Characteristics (continued)

- [Mutism](#), the inability to speak, is observed in approximately 35 to 50 percent of individuals with Autism. This inability to produce verbal language is often attributed to cognitive deficits or [apraxia](#), the inability to volitionally control the movements required for speech production. With such a significant statistic of mutism in the Autism population, it is essential that augmentative and/or alternative communication options be made available to your family member with Autism if they are not developing speech.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Communication Characteristics (continued)

- A consistent area of difficulty for many people with Autism is understanding or comprehending language. This difficulty, if ignored, can lead to a lack of skill acquisition as well as behavioral issues. Your family member with Autism may struggle with language comprehension so instead he or she relies on environmental cues to understand language.
- For those individuals with Autism who develop verbal language, many struggle with social pragmatic language. That is, they have difficulty initiating conversation, maintaining topic, and being flexible in conversational speech.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Communication Characteristics (continued)

- Another common characteristic of individuals with Autism who do have language is echolalia, the repeating of words and phrases previously heard. Echolalia can be immediate or delayed. It is important to know that [echolalic](#) speech serves a function for the individual with Autism, and the function must be determined so that appropriate language can be modeled.

Quiz 5

Question 1 of 3

Point Value: 10

This is a MULTIPLE RESPONSE question. Select ALL of the answers from the list below that you believe to be correct (HINT: there are THREE correct answers).

Which are NOT examples of social pragmatic language?

- Labeling objects
- Asking social questions
- staying on topic in a conversation
- Randomly changing the topic of conversation
- Repeating what others have said
- Initiating a conversation

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What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Social Behavior Characteristics

Social behavior deficits impact all individuals with Autism, across the spectrum. Not only do these social deficits impact your family member's ability to interact with others, they make traditional strategies ineffective. This is primarily due to the fact your family member with Autism is not intrinsically reinforced by education. For your family member to be successful, educators must utilize tangible rewards for school performance, appropriate behavior, and social interaction.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Social Behavior Characteristics (continued)

The following social characteristics are some that are common in individuals with Autism.

- Many people with Autism struggle with empathy; that is, they lack the understanding of how others feel. This difficulty with perspective significantly impacts social relationships for individuals with Autism across the spectrum.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Social Behavior Characteristics (continued)

- Another characteristic of individuals with Autism is the inability to engage in imaginative or abstract play early in life. Young children with Autism often manipulate toys appropriately but do not use the toys to act out scenarios or imitate social scenes they have observed. This lack of imaginative activity will impact your family member as they get older, as they struggle with abstract concepts, problem solving, and [inferencing](#).

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Social Behavior Characteristics (continued)

- The lack of understanding of social cues is another social deficit for many individuals with Autism. For example, typically students intuitively know that when the classroom teacher peers over her glasses it is time to stop engaging in a particular behavior. Your family member may rarely observe that motion as a sign to stop their own behavior.
- Many individuals with Autism do not use nonverbal behavior to complement their social interactions. That is, they do not use gestures or make facial expressions to support their interactions.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Social Behavior Characteristics (continued)

- Due to their social behavior deficits, many individuals with Autism desire limited, controlled social contact or avoid social contact altogether. Typical social behavior can be quite overwhelming for your family member; they are often more successful when exposed to predicted social activities.

Quiz 6

Question 1 of 2 ▾

Point Value: 10

This is a MULTIPLE CHOICE question. Complete the following statement by selecting the ONE correct answer from the list below.

Lack of imaginative or abstract play as a child can impact the individual with Autism as they grow older by...

- leading to better problem solving skills and ability to reason through abstract ideas.
- leading to difficulty in understanding abstract concepts and problem solving.
- leading to lack of social and communication skills.
- leading to a lack of creativity and artistic talent.

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What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics

While behavioral characteristics of individuals with Autism are not included in the diagnostic criteria for any pervasive developmental disorder, these characteristics can significantly impact the success of your family member, at home as well as in other environments.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics (continued)

Some common behavioral characteristics are listed below and on the following pages.

- Many individuals with Autism are challenged by secondary deficits which are manifested through self-stimulatory behaviors. Examples include hand flapping, eye gazing, twirling, repetitively touching a particular texture, and repetitive vocal sounds. Self-stimulatory behaviors are just that: your family member is engaging in a behavior that feels good. It is internally reinforcing, and by the very nature of reinforcement is often difficult to extinguish or reduce.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics (continued)

Self-stimulatory behaviors may be the result of sensory integration deficits; that is, your family member is not processing senses normally. They may be overwhelmed by sight, sound, touch, or even taste. For example, if a your family member is not processing visual stimulation, he may seek out more visual stimulation from the environment, and hand flapping may occur as a result.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics (continued)

- Due to difficulty understanding the surrounding environment, your family member may exhibit undesirable emotional responses to what is going on around him/her. Typically, there is a function to most undesirable behavior. Behaviors such as crying, throwing tantrums, aggression, self-injury, and destruction all may appear as behavior that is communicating that they want something, do not want something, are trying to escape from a situation, or are trying to communicate with others.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics (continued)

- Another common behavioral characteristic of many people with Autism is repetitive behavior, as noted in self-stimulatory behaviors or routines and rituals. Your family member may become quite distressed, for example, if the morning routine has been broken. He or she may use routines and rituals to understand their environment and expectations of others.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics (continued)

- Having a preoccupation that is all-encompassing and often nonfunctional is another behavioral characteristic seen in many individuals with Autism. This preoccupation could be something as simple as trains, or as complicated as mathematics. The preoccupation may be so prominent that it prohibits your family member from learning or engaging in social interaction.

What Are The Characteristics Of Autism?



Behavioral Characteristics (continued)

- Lack of awareness of common dangers, or overly fearful behavior in situations that are not dangerous, is another characteristic that may be seen in your family member. Often parents report that their young children with Autism are unaware of simple common dangers such as a hot stove, traffic, or an unfriendly animal. Excess fear of non-fearful situations can be as simple as your family member being afraid of a hair dryer, walking into a room, or a particular sound.

Quiz 7

Question 1 of 3

Point Value: 10

This is a MULTIPLE RESPONSE question. Select ALL of the answers from the list below that you believe to be correct (HINT: there are FOUR correct answers).

Which of the following situations may illustrate behavioral characteristics of individuals with Autism?

- Raffi is very friendly and often greets strangers on the street and tries to engage them in a conversation.
- Austin is overly cautious when crossing streets and is constantly warning others of the danger of busy streets.
- Celina has difficulty following a set morning routine even though she has been taught a set of simple steps to follow every day.
- Carlos spends all of his free time looking at books about cars. When his parents try to engage him in a conversation all he can seem to talk about is cars.

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Congratulations on Completing this Lesson



You have
successfully unlocked
the next lesson

