

## **Autism Awareness Month**

### ***What is Autism?***

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.

Symptoms of autism, and their severity, vary considerably in each individual on the autism spectrum. One child may not have the same symptoms and may seem very different from another child with the same diagnosis.

### ***Social Challenges***

Children with autism have difficulties interpreting what others are thinking and feeling. Subtle social cues—whether a smile, a wink, or a grimace—may have little meaning. To a child who misses these cues, “Come here” always means the same thing, whether the speaker is smiling and extending her arms for a hug or frowning and planting her fists on her hips. Without the ability to interpret gestures and facial expressions, the social world may seem bewildering.

### ***Language Challenges***

Some children may exhibit slight delays in language, or even seem to have unusually large vocabularies but have great difficulty in sustaining a conversation. The “give and take” of normal conversation is hard for them. For example, they may carry on a monologue on a favorite subject but fail to give the other person an opportunity to comment.

Another difficulty is often the inability to understand body language, tone of voice, or “phrases of speech.” They might interpret a sarcastic expression such as “Oh, that’s just great” as meaning it really IS great. In addition, some children might speak like little adults, but fail to pick up on the “kid-speak” that is common in their peers.

### ***Repetitive Behaviors***

Although children with autism usually appear physically normal, odd repetitive motions may set them apart from other children. Examples include repeatedly flapping their arms or walking on their toes.

Children with autism might also exhibit repetitive behavior by being obsessed with learning all about one subject, whether it’s vacuum cleaners, train schedules or lighthouses.

In addition, children with autism often need consistency in their environment. A slight change in any routine — in mealtimes or going to school at a certain time and by the same route — can be extremely disturbing for them. Perhaps order and sameness lend some stability in a world of confusion.

### ***Motor Challenges***

For some autistic children, sports may be difficult and fine motor tasks (e.g. buttoning, handwriting, using utensils and tools) often require occupational therapy support. Some children also have difficulty in understanding where their body is in space -- a sensation

that comes automatically to the rest of us. This makes moving through a crowded area (and social distancing) more challenging and may inadvertently put off others when they stand too close.

### ***Sensory Challenges***

Many people with autism are highly attuned or even painfully sensitive to certain sounds, textures, tastes, and smells. Some find the feel of certain clothing touching their skin almost unbearable, or might be distracted by the buzz of an airplane or a bee long before anyone else is aware of its presence. Even the flicker of a fluorescent light can be disorienting.

On the other end, some people with autism are oblivious to extreme cold or heat (dangerous in icy conditions or when working near a stove); or a child with autism may fall and break an arm, yet never cry.

These sensitivities may prove challenging in school. For example, indoor lunch, recess, P.E and assemblies are times when the lack of structure, large numbers of students, unpredictability and excessive noise can become overwhelming. Even the sound of groups of students clapping can be deafening to a child with autism.

### ***Teaching Autism Awareness to Kids***

It is often difficult to recognize a child with autism, so teaching children kindness and sensitivity toward anyone who may have “quirks” or have trouble making friends can be key in preventing misunderstandings and potential bullying. [Click here](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/17-childrens-books-that-promote-understanding-of-autism_n_5ade4580e4b036e7aeb58a64) ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/17-childrens-books-that-promote-understanding-of-autism\\_n\\_5ade4580e4b036e7aeb58a64](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/17-childrens-books-that-promote-understanding-of-autism_n_5ade4580e4b036e7aeb58a64)) to view books that can help teach autism awareness to kids.

For more information on autism, please visit [www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org) or [click here](https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/School%20Community%20Tool%20Kit.pdf) (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/School%20Community%20Tool%20Kit.pdf>)