

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTISM

? WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a brain-based difference in the way a person learns, socializes, communicates, reacts to changes, and experiences their environment including sensory input like sounds and lights.

Like all people, autistic people are individuals. Some autistic people are happy to spend more time alone, and some people are very sociable and outgoing. Some autistic people speak to communicate, and some use signs, or a device, or behavior to communicate. Some autistic people have passionate interests that become their life's work. Some move differently and find joy or relaxation in movements like flapping their hands or walking on their tiptoes. All autistic people experience love, happiness, loneliness, sadness, pain, and every other emotion, but they may have a unique way of showing how they are feeling. There is not one way to be autistic, like there is not one way to be human.

? WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

Autism is caused by a complex combination of genetic and environmental factors. This is why autism tends to run in families, but not with a predictable pattern. Many genes controlling the ways that brain cells connect, communicate, and function may be different in autistic people.

When scientists talk about autism having "environmental" causes, they mean factors besides genetics that influence the developing brain, like being born prematurely, having older parents, and having some medication, illness or other exposures during pregnancy. In the scientific literature, "environmental" does not necessarily refer to toxins.

? DO VACCINES CAUSE AUTISM?

Vaccines (including the MMR vaccine) do not cause autism. Dozens of studies have shown that there is no relationship between autism and vaccine type, vaccine schedule, or thimerosal (an ingredient used in some vaccines).

This idea started because of a 1998 study of the MMR vaccine in 12 children. This study was retracted because it was later discovered that the data was changed (falsified) to make it look like the MMR vaccine causes autism. The person who led the study was paid by lawyers to prove a link between vaccines and autism. This person has lost his medical license.

Developmental differences (related or unrelated to autism) are often diagnosed around 18 to 24 months old. You might remember completing and discussing a form called the MCHAT, which helps to understand if a child might have autism, with your pediatrician during these particular visits. This timing happens to line up with when some vaccines are given. This does not mean that vaccines cause developmental difference or delay.



? WHY IS AUTISM BECOMING MORE COMMON?

Autism is being diagnosed more often now because:

- 1 the definition of autism became much broader over the years, as we learned more about autism
- 2 although there are still major barriers, people in underserved groups are more likely to be able to access autism evaluation and be counted as having autism
- 3 we are looking for autism in populations where we previously had low concern, like girls and women
- 4 we are now identifying autism more in young children, teens, and adults, not just in preschoolers
- 5 we are recognizing that some kids with intellectual disability or a medical/genetic disorder also have autism and need services for autism
- 6 more premature babies are surviving, and adults are older when they have babies; these both increase the risk of autism; and
- 7 we are recognizing that some kids we used to just call "quirky" actually have autism, and would benefit from supports.

? WHAT KINDS OF THERAPY MIGHT HELP MY AUTISTIC CHILD?

Some kinds of autism therapy are backed by science that shows they work. Science-backed therapies and supports can help autism families build skills and improve quality of life. For example, parents are powerful teachers to their children. So much so, that some therapies center on parent-child interactions. Learning about these science-based programs is a great way to support your child's learning.

There are also many dangerous and expensive therapies for autism that do not work. Some people take advantage of parents' fears and worries by selling fake therapies. It is important to talk to your child's healthcare provider before starting a new therapy.

? WHAT IS "NEURODIVERSITY"?

All humans have brains, and no one kind of brain is best. Neurodiversity is the idea that each person's thinking style is one of the many things that makes them unique. Autism is a fundamental part of who someone is, starting before they are even born. Some parts of being autistic or loving someone who is autistic can be hard, and many other parts can be joyous and beautiful. Your child is still the same amazing and unique person no matter what labels they are given.

? WHAT ARE SOME ADVANTAGES OF "LABELING" CHILDREN AS AUTISTIC?

Evidence-based autism therapies like social communication interventions, naturalistic and developmental behavioral interventions (NDBI), and flexibility/executive functioning interventions improve foundational social learning skills, social interaction skills, adaptive or emotional-behavioral functioning, language and communication skills, and IQ in autistic children.

A medical diagnosis of autism is usually needed to access insurance-based autism therapies and services. The earlier autistic children are identified, the more therapy can help.

? WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE RISKS OF BEING EVALUATED FOR OR DIAGNOSED AS AUTISTIC?

Understandably, families may have concerns about stigma, privacy, or other risks of being given an autism diagnosis. At the same time, an autism diagnosis, when appropriate, can help you better understand, support, and advocate for your child. Talking about your concerns with your child's healthcare provider is important.

? WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT AUTISM?

Children's National has more information about autism for families at www.childrensnational.org/CASDhandouts
The Organization for Autism Research has science-based information about autism:
researchautism.org/families/about-autism