

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

What makes you think my child has Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Today one in 68 children has Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD. As a parent or a family member of a child who receives an ASD diagnosis you might be wondering, “What makes you think my child has an Autism Spectrum Disorder?”

ASD is diagnosed by looking at your child’s:

- ▶ Social interactions
- ▶ Social communications (getting your point across)
- ▶ Restricted areas of interest, repetitive behavior, and inflexibility

Some of the symptoms are:

- ▶ Limited social referencing (i.e., checking in with caregivers by looking at them)
- ▶ Limited communication (i.e., talking with family)
- ▶ Lack of emotional expression (i.e., smiling)
- ▶ Unusual motor movements (i.e., flapping hands)
- ▶ Unusual toy play (i.e., lining up toys)
- ▶ Intense focus on specific interests (i.e., talks only about favorite subject)
- ▶ Unique use of language (i.e., repeats others)
- ▶ Difficulty interacting with other children (i.e., trouble playing with friends)

The symptoms are not very specific because the diagnosis is different in each child. Diagnoses describe areas of concern; however, diagnoses do not describe a child. Every child is different!

What are the recent changes in the DSM V regarding ASD?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association, helps health professionals diagnose and categorize mental disorders, including ASD. In the most recent fifth edition, all Autism diagnoses that were once separate, like Asperger’s Syndrome, were combined under one diagnosis—ASD. Minor changes were made in the symptoms of ASD.

What is different in Wyoming?

Wyoming has an education diagnosis of ASD that includes a *consideration of cognitive functioning*. This is important because it can determine the special education services a child receives. The Wyoming Department of Education uses impaired cognitive development to describe ASD. This includes children who:

- ▶ Have difficulty with abstract thinking and/or the ability to generalize
- ▶ Show perseverative (e.g., highly focused) thinking or decreased ability to process symbolic information (e.g., cartoon drawings, letters)

What do we know about the causes of Autism?

- ▶ Genetic factors play a role
- ▶ Environmental factors contribute as well
- ▶ **Immunizations have not been shown to cause ASD**

Why does it matter what causes ASD?

The more we know about what causes ASD, the better we become at:

- ▶ Identifying autism early
- ▶ Providing helpful interventions
- ▶ Providing good information for families and care providers
- ▶ Finding possible cures and more helpful interventions

Take note: Knowing the cause should not be about finding out who or what to blame. Knowing the cause will enable families and healthcare teams to focus on what they can do to help.

How can I support my child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

To help support babies and young children:

- ▶ Watch your child's development. Act early by talking to the child's doctor or nurse about any concerns.
- ▶ Teach appropriate behavior. Ignore negative behavior and reward appropriate behavior.
- ▶ Teach skills for your child's age.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for a child to learn new skills.

To help support older children, teens, and young adults:

- ▶ Try Social Stories™, as a way to help children, youth, and adults understand social situations (by Carol Gray, 2004)
- ▶ Use scripts or role-play to show appropriate social interactions
- ▶ Use video models of appropriate behavior
- ▶ Use a peer mentor who demonstrates appropriate behavior
- ▶ Help your child organize with paper or computer-based calendars or other assistive technologies

- ▶ Discuss daily schedules frequently and in advance
- ▶ Provide extra support during transition such as changes at semesters or new jobs
- ▶ Speak in a direct and clear manner—do not use figurative speech (i.e., “It’s time to clean your room,” as opposed to “I’ve told you a million times to clean your room!”)
- ▶ Provide time for your child to answer
- ▶ Use different ways to communicate, speak, write, or role-play

Resources

10 guidelines for Social Stories (Carol Gray, 2004)—
www.thegraycenter.org

Autism Internet Modules—
www.autisminternetmodules.org

Picture Exchange Communication—
www.childrenwithspecialneeds.com/pecs.html

Teaching and Education for Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children From Theoretical Understanding to Educational Practice. By Gary B. Mesibov & Victoria Shea—www.unc.edu/depts/teacch

Does My Child Have Autism: A Parents Guide to Early Detection and Intervention in Autism Spectrum Disorders—A book by Wendy Stone

Autism: A Practical Guide for Parents—A book by Alan Yau

Making Sense of Autism—A book by Travis Thompson, Ph.D

Dr. Thompson's Straight Talk on Autism—A book by Travis Thompson, Ph.D.

Autism and Its Medical Management: A Guide for Parents and Professional—A book by Michael G. Chez

WATR Assistive Technology Resources (WATR)—
watr@uwyo.edu, 1-888-989-9463, uwyo.edu/wind/watr

Wyoming Family to Family Health Information Center

<http://www.uwyo.edu/wind/f2f/>

Wyoming Institute for Disabilities: 1-888-989-9463

UPLIFT—Federation of Families: 1-888-875-4383



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This publication was made possible by grant number 1 H84MC24069 from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Health Resources and Services Administration. The factsheet was a produced in partnership with Debbie Sullivan, F2F partner and Douglas Scambler, Ph.D., licensed clinical psychologist.