

APRIL IS AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH

Every April we celebrate Autism Month. It helps to create awareness and acceptance of autism in the community. Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated 1 in 36 children and 1 in 45 adults in the United States today.

On average, autism is diagnosed around age 5 in the U.S., with signs appearing by age 2 or 3. Anybody can be autistic, regardless of sex, age, race or ethnicity. However, research from the CDC says that boys get diagnosed with autism four times more often than girls.

There is no medical autism test, like a blood test, to diagnose autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Instead, experienced medical professionals examine a person's developmental history and behavior, interview and observe the person and their loved ones, and use professional screening and diagnostic tools to make a diagnosis.

While an autism diagnosis can only be given by a health care professional, there are several screening tools that can alert parents, caregivers and autistic people to potential autism symptoms. Early screening for autism can impact access to services and supports, which in turn can influence future outcomes for autistic individuals.

Sensory issues are common in people with autism and are even included in the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder. Each autistic person is unique, and this includes their personal sensory sensitivities. People with autism might have sensitivities to: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, balance (vestibular), awareness of body position and movement (proprioception), awareness of internal body cues and sensations (interoception).

Autistic people can experience both hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) and hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) to a wide range of stimuli. Most people have a combination of both.

Many autistic people experience hypersensitivity to bright lights or certain light wavelengths (e.g., LED or fluorescent lights). Certain sounds, smells, textures and tastes can also be overwhelming. This can result in sensory avoidance – trying to get away from stimuli that most people can easily tune out. Sensory avoidance can look like pulling away from physical touch, covering the ears to avoid loud or unpredictable sounds, or avoiding certain kinds of clothing.

Hyposensitivity is also common. This can look like a constant need for movement; difficulty recognizing sensations like hunger, illness or pain; or attraction to loud noises, bright lights and vibrant colors. People who are hyposensitive may engage in sensory

seeking to get more sensory input from the environment. For example, people with autism may stimulate their senses by making loud noises, touching people or objects, or rocking back and forth.

Having unique sensitivities to certain types of sensory input can create challenges in everyday situations like school, work or community settings. For someone who is hypersensitive, it can take a lot of effort to spend all day under LED or fluorescent lights, navigate a crowded space or process conversations in rooms with background noise. This can be incredibly physically and emotionally draining and can leave the person feeling too exhausted to do other important tasks.

Many autistic people use stimming as a form of sensory seeking to keep their sensory systems in balance. Repetitive movements, sounds, or fidgeting can help people with autism stay calm, relieve stress or block out uncomfortable sensory input.

However, constant movement can sometimes seem inappropriate or disruptive in certain settings (like the workplace), so autistic people often feel like they need to suppress their stimming. When this happens, it becomes more and more difficult to self-regulate, leading to sensory overload, exhaustion or burnout.

Sensory overload happens when an intense sensory stimulus overwhelms your ability to cope. This can be triggered by a single event, like an unexpected loud noise, or it can build up over time due to the effort it takes to cope with sensory sensitivities in daily life. Sensory overload can feel like intense anxiety, a need to escape the situation or difficulty communicating. When the brain has to put all of its resources into sensory processing, it can shut off other functions, like speech, decision making and information processing.

Many people with autism show certain behaviors when they are experiencing a sensory issue: increased movement, such as jumping, spinning or crashing into things, increased stimming, such as hand flapping, making repetitive noises or rocking back and forth, talking faster and louder, or not talking at all, covering ears or eyes, difficulty recognizing internal sensations like hunger, pain or the need to use the bathroom, refusing or insisting on certain foods or clothing items, frequent chewing on non-food items, frequent touching of others or playing rough, difficulty communicating or responding as the brain shifts resources to deal with sensory input (shutdown), and escalating, overwhelming emotions or need to escape a situation (meltdown).

We know that there is not one type of autism, but many. Autism looks different for everyone, and each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges. Some autistic people can speak, while others are nonverbal or minimally verbal and communicate in other ways. Some have intellectual disabilities, while some do not. Some require significant support in their daily lives, while others need less support and, in some cases, live entirely independently.

Many people with autism experience other medical, behavioral or mental health issues that affect their quality of life. Among the most common co-occurring conditions are:

attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and depression, gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, seizures and sleep disorders.

Autism is a lifelong condition, and an autistic person's needs, strengths and challenges may change over time. As they transition through life stages, they may need different types of support and accommodations. Early intervention and therapies can make a big difference in a person's skills and outcomes later in life.

Every child or adult with autism has unique strengths and challenges, so there is no one size fits all approach to autism treatment and intervention.

Many people with autism have additional medical conditions such as sleep disturbance, seizures and gastrointestinal (GI) distress. Addressing these conditions can improve attention, learning and related behaviors. Many people also benefit from therapies for communication, social skills, or motor challenges, or to learn other skills like feeding or self-care.

Each autism intervention or treatment plan should be tailored to address the person's specific needs. A person's treatment plan can include behavioral interventions, other therapies, medicines or a combination of these.

Autism Therapies and Interventions include: Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), Floortime, Occupational Therapy (OT), Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT), Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), Speech Therapy, TEACCH, and Verbal Behavior.

We are here to help you with any concerns for your children. Our surveys and regular checkups are times that we review regular developmental milestones and goals. These are times that we use the above mentioned screening tools as well as observe and address any concerns that the family has. We have early interventions in the local area to include CDSA and NC county specific early learning programs to help our children succeed into grade school as well. Early recognition and therapy is so important for autism diagnosis and success. Some websites you may find helpful include:

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/>

<https://autismsociety.org/>

<https://www.ncdhhs.gov/itp-beearly>

<https://www.wcpss.net/Page/38132>

