



# WHAT IS AUTISM?

Created by: Autism Yukon, June 2006

Using information from the

Alberta Learning & Teaching Resources Branch

# **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

**ASD is term we use to cover the 5 types of  
Pervasive Development Disorders  
categorized in the DSM IV**

**(The Diagnostic & Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders 4th Edition  
used by the American Psychiatric Association)**

# Understanding ASD

**Those 5 Pervasive Developmental Disorders are:**

Autism Disorder

Asperger's Disorder

Rett's Disorder

Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

Pervasive Development Disorder - Not otherwise Specified

# What is ASD?

ASD is a complex neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain.

The spectrum of disabilities in each unique person with ASD can range from mild to severe but they all share these characteristics on some degree...

1. Impairment in social interaction
2. Impairment in communication
3. Restricted or Repetitive Patterns of behaviour, interests and activities

# How many people have ASD?

- Our current understanding is that 1 in 167 people have an ASD.
- In the Yukon population of approx. 30,000 people = approx. 180 people living with ASD.
- Higher prevalence in boys. For every 5 people diagnosed with ASD, 4 are male.

# What causes ASD?

- The cause or combination of causes is not fully known
- There is growing evidence that ASD is a genetic condition
- Complications during pregnancy, environmental factors, chromosomal abnormalities may also be a factor

# A bit more about Autism Spectrum Disorders

## Autism Disorder

- also known as Autism or Classic Autism
- Usually diagnosed before Age 3
- Delays or abnormal functioning in the following areas:
  1. **Social interaction** (eye contact, facial expressions, understanding body language or gestures, failure to development peer relationships)
  2. **Social communication** (may not speak at all, or may be verbal but not able to have a conversation with others, may echo people)
  3. **Behaviours & Activities** (abnormally focused or intense preoccupation, compulsive adherence to nonfunctional routines or rituals and/or repetitive motor mannerisms, e.g., hand flapping, finger twisting, or complex whole-body movements such as spinning or rocking)

# A bit more about Autism Spectrum Disorders

## **Asperger's Syndrome:**

The main difference between Asperger's and other ASDs is individuals with Asperger's do not have significant delays in early language and cognitive development.

## **Rett's Disorder**

Occurs only in females. Characterized by the development of significant deficits following a normal period of development of at least 5 months. A rare disorder. We know of only one little girl in the Yukon with Rett's.

## **Childhood Disintegrative Disorder**

A regression in multiple areas following a period of at least 2 years of normal development. Much less common than Autistic Disorder.

## **Pervasive developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified**

Also known as PDD-NOS. Have displayed symptoms similar to but not identical to those with other ASD's. Onset may be later. Criteria does not meet any other Pervasive development disorders.

# Myths about Autism Spectrum Disorders

## MYTH #1

“All individuals with ASD avoid eye contact and social contact”.

- ✓ People with ASD are diverse & unique so we should avoid using **all** or **every** when describing those with this disorder.
- ✓ Although social difficulties are a hallmark of ASD, many people with ASD display affection, initiate social interaction and enjoy social activities

# Myths about Autism Spectrum Disorders

## MYTH #2

“People with ASD possess extraordinary skills or talents”

The vast majority of people with ASD do not possess the same extraordinary skills like we saw in “Rainman”. Most people with ASD have an uneven scattering of skill development and some skills may stand out more than others.

# Myths about Autism Spectrum Disorders

## MYTH #3

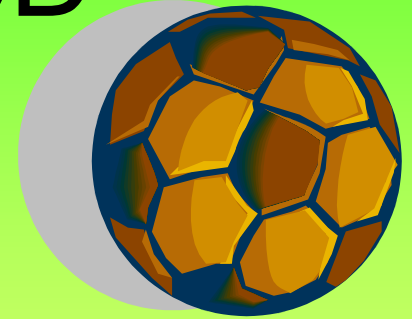
“Autism Spectrum Disorders  
is caused by bad parenting”

It has been empirically demonstrated (or scientifically proven) that  
parents of children with ASD do not  
differ from parents of typical children.



# Characteristics of ASD

## Patterns of Attention



- The person may selectively attend to limited things or may focus their attention on a small part of something. For example the child may focus on the ball, but not look at the person throwing it or they may notice the staple on the corner of the page, but not the contents of the paper.
- They may not notice relevant cues around them.
- They may have difficulty shifting attention from one thing to the next.

# Characteristics of ASD

## Responses to Sensory Stimuli

Responses may range from being very sensitive (**hypersensitive**) to being unaware of sensation (**hyposensitive**). For example the person may fall down and scrap their leg but not feel or react to pain as much as peers (**hyposensitive**). On the other hand, the person may not be able to tolerate shirt labels, certain food textures or walking on grass in bare feet (**hypersensitive**)

They may have difficulty with sensory processing.

- Tactile System (Skin & Nervous System). Touch and Textures
- Auditory System (Sounds)
- Visual & Olfactory Systems (Sight & Smell)
- Vestibular and Proprioceptive Systems (orienting yourself)



# Characteristics of ASD

## Anxiety

Anxiety is not specifically identified in the DSM IV but many individuals, parents and teachers identify this anxiety as a characteristic of ASD.

The anxiety may be especially seen when the child is in unfamiliar settings and unpredictable situations. The anxiety is caused by:

The inability to express oneself.

Difficulties in processing sensory information.

A High Need for predictability.

Difficulty in understanding social expectations.

Fearing a situation because they are not understood.

*Wouldn't you feel a little anxious?*



# Characteristics of ASD

## Communication

- May have limited use of language – may be non-speaking, or may only use language to ask questions but not initiate conversation.
- May talk repetitively on one topic (trains, bugs, movies).
- May not understand abstract ideas and inferences.
- May have trouble following directions especially multi-step.
- May have difficulty following conversation rules (staying on topic, starting a conversation, interrupting).
- Literal interpretation of language.
- May not realize that “everybody” means them too.

# Characteristics of ASD

## Social Interactions

- May not use or understand appropriate facial expression, gestures, tone of voice.
- May not share a “joint focus of attention”.
- May not “get” non-verbal social cues. This interferes with comprehension of spoken word.
- May not initiate interactions or may initiate in unusual manner.
- May play along side a peer using similar toys but does not play with the peer.
- May have trouble understanding another person’s perspective.
- May not understand rules of games.

# Strategies to Help

***Remember that behaviours are a form of communication.***

- Hand flapping may communicate anxiety about a situation.
- Repeating a phrase from a movie may be an attempt at initiating play with another child.
- Standing beside the swing may be a request to have someone push them.

# More Strategies to Help

There are many things that we can do to support a person with ASD in our community.

- Learn More about ASD
- Become involved in events or volunteer and celebrate our diverse community!
- Ask questions if you don't understand
- Be patient
- Be kind
- Don't make judgments
- Learn about other community agencies that support children & adults with ASD