



# AUTISM: WHAT IS IT?

## Autism Spectrum Disorder: Key Summary

- Autism is not an illness nor a disease. Autism simply refers to a different way in which the brain processes incoming information. Not a bad way, not a wrong way, not a weird way, simply a different way.
- This understanding is perhaps the single most valuable benefit to be derived from a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A child who understands his or her differences can more readily embrace those differences as strengths, rather than jumping to false and dispiriting conclusions about them.
- The other main benefit to be derived from an assessment for ASD is that it may assist you to formulate a management plan to support your child.
- Be aware though, if your child is displaying evidence of functional deficits, such as language delay or social communication deficits, those deficits can and should be addressed regardless of whether ASD has been diagnosed or assessed for.
- The key word in Autism Spectrum Disorder is 'Spectrum'. Children diagnosed with ASD may fall anywhere along the spectrum, from the extremely light end to the extremely severe end, and anywhere in between. No one child is the same as any other.
- It is important to remember that all of us who don't meet criteria for ASD also fall along a spectrum. We all have our similarities and our differences to one another. No one person is the same as any other.
- Whilst it is fantastic that you wish to help your child with his or her challenges, it is imperative that you never, ever lose sight of your child's strengths and that you always remember to reinforce those strengths to the child. You can be certain that if you fail to focus on the child's strengths, the child will fail to focus on them too. A good practice to get into - perhaps once a day, perhaps once a week - is to say to yourself, "What are the top three things that I like about my child." Mentioning these to your child every once in a while is a good idea too.
- Raising a child, any child, is hard work. It is unrelenting and it can take its' toll on even the most resilient amongst us. So take time to look after your own physical and mental well-being. Dr J strongly encourages all parents to be physically active and to consider touching base with your own mental skills coach (a psychologist) every now and again.



## Autism Spectrum Disorder: In More Detail

Autism is not an illness nor a disease. Autism is a developmental condition and it simply refers to a different way of processing the world around us. Not a bad way, not a wrong way, not a weird way, just a different way.

This understanding is perhaps the single most valuable benefit to be derived from a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. The understanding that 'my brain simply processes the world around me in a different way'. With such an understanding, children are far more likely to embrace their differences, embrace their individuality and recognise their strengths. With such an understanding, parents are in a far better position to nurture their child to do so.

All children tend to be aware of their differences and, when they don't understand why, they are often quick to draw false conclusions such as "I'm different, therefore I must be weird". For children who meet ASD criteria, a well informed understanding of autism can help them to correct such misattributions and this can be very, very valuable for the rest of their life.

Another benefit to be derived from an ASD diagnosis is that the understanding that comes with this can help parents and carers to understand, support and be less frustrated by child behaviours that may otherwise be extremely frustrating.

### 1. What is Autism?

Poker is said to be a game that takes a day to learn and a lifetime to master. The same can be said for autism. For those of us who care for children with autism, we may develop a basic understanding of autism fairly quickly but mastering this understanding may take a life-time.

So first let's put in place a few building blocks upon which to develop your understanding...

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental condition. The origins of the word autism are derived from the Greek 'autos' meaning 'self'. So the term 'autism' effectively equates to 'self-ism'. The term was first applied to patients who displayed extreme autistic features. These patients appeared to be somewhat absorbed in their own world and disinterested in others, hence the term 'self-ism' or 'autism' was coined. Our understanding of autism has changed and evolved greatly from when it was first described in 1943. Undoubtedly, our understanding will continue to evolve for a long time to come.

The key features of Autism Spectrum Disorder are functional deficits in social communication and social interaction as well as restricted, repetitive behaviours. The manner in which these key features may manifest themselves can be very broad ranging.

It is important to note that many children display evidence of some autistic features but don't actually meet the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### 2. Is there anything good that comes from a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Be very clear, there are many, many strengths that are associated with autism. For instance, many people on the autism spectrum display a very literal, clear-cut, 'black & white' view of matters. Whilst this can present them with some challenges, it can also help them to focus in on the data that really matters and to ignore the distractors.



Furthermore, many people on the autism spectrum have intense, passionate interests and very detailed knowledge about particular topics. Such mind-sets can often lead to them being very good at particular skills and particular occupations such as information technology.

Many extremely successful people with autism have displayed such skill sets including: Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Nikola Tesla, Susan Boyle, Temple Grandin and Satoshi Tajiri (the creator of Pokemon!). It is thought that Michelangelo and Albert Einstein were also likely to have fallen somewhere along the autism spectrum.

So remember, never ever lose sight of your child's strengths and always reinforce those strengths to your child. You may wish to read ['The Boy Electric'](#) which is a brief communication regarding one boy's interest and fascination.

### 3. But what about the challenges?

Of course, with autism comes challenges. The challenges you might face are likely to be particular to your particular child and your particular situation. The challenges will also largely depend on the severity of the autistic features displayed by the child.

Some common challenges include the child operating on his/her own agenda; the child seemingly disregarding instructions; the child displaying limited affection for those to whom he/she is closest; significant social anxiety, sometimes associated with aggression; difficulties coping with change; meltdowns that are disproportionate to the triggering event; "stimming" behaviours; sensory processing issues such as being overwhelmed by crowds or noise.

It is important to understand that significant social anxiety is very frequently associated with autism. Such anxiety usually underlies issues such as aggression and school refusal. If a child does display evidence of anxiety, engagement with psychological services to assist the child to recognise and cope with anxiety is one of the most important aspects of supporting a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### 4. Where can I find out more?

For further information regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder, you may wish to check out [Useful Links](#)