Autism Spectrum Disorder

Speech Pathology Australia

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

The term 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD) describes a condition that affects the way a person makes sense of, and interacts with, other people and their environment.

Children, adolescents, and adults with ASD experience difficulties with verbal and non-verbal communication, difficulties initiating and maintaining reciprocal social relationships, and they display restricted and repetitive patterns of interests and behaviours. Individuals with ASD may also commonly experience associated difficulties; including learning disability as well as problems with sleep, motor coordination, and sensory processing. Some individuals with ASD also display remarkable talents in areas such as mathematics, art, and music. Ultimately, no two people experience ASD the same way. Some people with ASD will benefit from extra support throughout their lives; other people with ASD will live with complete independence.

How common is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Approximately 1 in 88 children meet the criteria for ASD; this is equal to 1 in 54 boys and 1 in 252 girls. ASD appears to be equally common across different countries and cultural groups. The latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that approximately 65,000 people in Australia are diagnosed with ASD.

What causes Autism Spectrum Disorder?

The social-communication and behavioural differences seen in children, adolescents, and adults with ASD reflect underlying differences in brain development and functioning. For some people, these neurological differences reflect changes in one or more identified genes. For others, it appears that genetic factors combine with environmental factors, such as higher parental age at the time of conception, to modestly increase the likelihood of developing ASD. For others still, the cause is unknown. However, we do know that vaccines and parenting style do not cause a child to be diagnosed with ASD.

How does ASD affect communication?

All people with ASD experience 'differences' in communication, but the impact of these differences in everyday life varies. Some children with ASD achieve their preschool speech and language milestones, only to be identified as having ASD when they start school where the social-communication demands increase. These children may talk fluently but have significant difficulty with the social aspects of language, such as knowing how to initiate and maintain a conversations and understanding meaning from other people's body language. For other children, 'differences' in communication are clearly seen early in life, with children not learning to talk without additional support.

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Living with ASD

Autism Spectrum Disorder is described as a 'lifelong disability' because it reflects underlying differences in brain development and functioning. Research suggests that the 'core features' of ASD remain stable over time but the outward signs of ASD change as people learn skills and strategies. To illustrate, a child with ASD starting primary school may find it difficult to play with other children, because the child does not intuitively learn and apply the unspoken 'social rules' that govern the way children talk and play together. However, with support, he can learn these rules and overcome the underlying difficulty. An adult with ASD who does not use speech can learn to communicate using alternative or augmentative communication. In all cases, supporting individuals with ASD and their families across the lifespan focusses on helping people to develop skills and strategies to address difficulties that they feel are most important. The goal is never to 'change the person'. It is not possible to predict how much support a child may benefit from as he or she grows into adulthood. Speech pathologists work on the basis that children, adolescents, and adults with ASD should have the capacity and the opportunity, to participate in all of the same life activities as their peers without ASD.

How can speech pathologists help?

Speech pathologists are the professionals best suited to addressing the social-communication difficulties experienced by people with ASD and need to be involved in all aspects of assessment, diagnosis, and intervention. Anyone who is concerned about ASD should speak with their general practitioner and a speech pathologist. Some speech pathologists specialise in working with people with ASD.

The assessment and diagnosis of ASD should be a multidisciplinary assessment involving, at minimum, a speech pathologist, psychologist, and medical practitioner. The purpose of the assessment is to rule out other possible causes for observed behaviours, to consider the extent to which the person is presenting with characteristics of ASD, to highlight areas of strength and areas of difficulty, and to establish goals and priorities for intervention.

For young children with ASD, speech pathologists work with the children, their parents, and teachers to enable speech and language development using evidence-based treatment approaches. They also work in multidisciplinary teams to provide comprehensive early intervention programs targeting all aspects of development. When children with ASD move to school, speech pathologists consult with parents and teachers and may provide individual and group programs to students with ASD aimed at supporting academic and social-communication development. Speech pathologists working with adults with ASD support their participation in life activities at home, work, and in the community.

How do I become a speech pathologist?
Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree.
To find out more go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?
Go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.