

## **What is Autism?**

Autism is a disorder of childhood, with an onset before the age 2 ½ years. It is marked by severe difficulties in communicating and forming relationships with other people, in developing language, and in using abstract concepts; repetitive and limited patterns of behaviour and obsessive resistance to tiny changes in familiar surroundings. Autistic children find it hard to understand how other people feel and so tend to remain isolated even into adult life. About 50% have learning disabilities but some are very intelligent and may even be gifted in specific areas.

*There are many children in our community world wide affected by Autism.*

## **Signs, Symptoms and Treatment**

Symptoms start in the first 3 years of life. It usually develops from birth (about 4 in 5 cases). In about 1 in 5 cases there is a period of normal development first before symptoms begin. There are four different groups of symptoms, all of which usually occur in children with autism.

## **Social Difficulties**

There are different types of problems and not all will occur in each case. These can generally be described as an "not being able to get on with people". So the child may:

- Seem to be aloof and rather 'stuck up'.
- Have little or no interest in other people.
- Have no real friends.
- Not understand other people's emotions. For example, not understanding why anyone has got cross with them.
- Prefer being alone.

## **Problems with Language and Communication**

Speech usually develops later than usual. When it does, the language (the use and choice of words) may develop wrongly. The sort of problems that children with autism have includes one or more of the following.

- Not be able to express themselves well.
- Not be able to understand gestures, facial expressions, or tone of voice.
- Say odd things. For example, repeating your words back to you, time and time again.
- Use odd phrases and odd choices of words.
- Sometimes use 10 words when 1 would do.
- Make up their own words.
- Not use their hands to make gestures as they speak.
- Not be able to understand difficult commands.

## **Poor Imagination**

Imaginative play is limited in children with autism. They tend to do the games and activities that they learn over and over again. Games may remain exactly the same every day. Games are usually those that a younger child would normally play.

### **Unusual Behaviours**

These are typical and include one or more of the following.

- Odd mannerisms such as hand-flapping or other odd pointless movements.
- Anger or aggression if routines are changed. Children with autism often hurt themselves when they are angry by banging their head or hitting their face. Sometimes they do this to get attention.
- Actions are repeated over and over again (like rocking back and forward).
- Obsessions may develop in older children and adolescents. For example, they may have interests in unusual things like train timetables and lists.

Parents often find these problems very confusing. Not surprisingly, parents often get frustrated.

### **What is the Cause of Autism?**

The cause is not known. There are various theories, and various factors may be involved.

Recently there has been speculation that the MMR vaccine may somehow cause autism. There is no evidence that this is true. Recently 2 studies have shown that, whereas the incidence of autism has increased 7 times in the last 10 years, the amount of the children receiving the MMR vaccine has remained the same. Based on these facts, and other studies, there is a strong case to say that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism.

### **What is the Treatment for Autism?**

Most children with autism are under the care of a specialist in child psychiatry. The sort of treatments that are provided include the following.

- Special education to help with language and communication skills.
- Behaviour therapy which aims to reduce 'bad' behaviours and promote 'good' behaviours.
- Medication is rarely used, but sometimes may be needed to help control outbursts of excitement or aggression.

There is no 'cure' for autism. The specialist education and support aim to maximise the potential of each child as they grow into adults. It is thought that the earlier the specialist input is started, the better the outcome.

There are various other treatments that will help autism. These range from special diets to intensive psychological therapies.

### **What is the Outlook (Prognosis)?**

Autism continues for life. As the severity can vary, it is difficult to predict the outcome for each child. Even without treatment, sometimes there is improvement in the teenage years and some people with autism become more sociable. Some adults with autism manage to work and get by with just a little support. Many need more support and live at home with parents or family. A placement in a residential home may be needed when older.

### **What is the Scale of Suffering?**

This group of children are deprived of any treatment or therapy and end up in institutions enduring terrible suffering for the rest of their lives. The cost to parents and to the community at larger is **enormous**. Nothing is being done for these unfortunate children or their families at the moment.

*In developing countries, the facilities to treat children with Autism in poor and very expensive.*