



Department of Mental Health,  
Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services

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### **What is autism?**

- Autism is a lifelong neurological disability that affects a person's ability to communicate, understand language, play and socially interact with others.
- The first signs of autism usually appear as developmental delays before age three.
- Autism is classified as a developmental disability because it interferes with the typical rate and patterns of childhood development.
- There are four diagnoses closely related to autism. They are PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified), Asperger disorder, Rett Disorder, and Childhood Disintegrative disorder (CDD).

### **What are the characteristics of autism?**

Every person with autism is different. However, there are some common characteristics of individuals with autism that may occur. Remember that although there are some common characteristics no two persons with autism experience the world or behave in the same way.

#### **Some common characteristics associated with autism:**

- Difficulty in using and understanding language. Some children develop typical speech patterns until age two.
- Poorly developed social skills and unusual play with toys.
- Over or under sensitivity to sound, sight, taste, touch, or smell.
- Repetitive behaviors such as spinning objects or rocking.
- Certain behaviors exhibited to stimulate the senses, such as switching a light on and off repeatedly, or humming loudly.
- Difficulty with changes to surroundings or routines.
- Very high levels of activity for long periods of time.
- Uneven skill development. Some skills are normal or superior for their age while others show significant delay.
- Challenging behaviors such as aggression, self-injury or severe withdrawal.

### **Are there known causes of autism?**

- Nobody knows what causes autism.
- Some scientists believe there is a biological cause that affects the working of the brain, but this has not been proven.
- It is possible there are many factors that could interact with one another which could cause different characteristics in each individual with autism.
- It is known that parents do not cause autism and that no factors in a child's experiences or in parenting styles are responsible for autism.

### **How widespread is autism?**

- According to the Autism Society of America, Autism Spectrum Disorder occurs in about 1 of every 160 births, and four times more often in boys than girls.
- Families of all racial, ethnic and social backgrounds anywhere in the world are affected.
- Autism occurs by itself, with mental retardation, or with other health problems, such as epilepsy, viral infections, or changes in a person's growth rate or metabolism.
- Less than 5 percent of persons with autism exhibit the genius-like abilities like Dustin Hoffman portrayed in "Rain Man."