

On autism

Note:

Here autistic children are being discussed, but many of the things mentioned here also apply to youngsters and grown-ups on the autism-spectrum.

The signs of autism can be very variable and they can express themselves as weak or strong. Disorders on the autism spectrum thus express autism in many different ways.

A child diagnosed with a disorder on the autism spectrum has considerable difficulties in the following three fields:

- reduced capacity for interacting socially
- reduced capacity in language and expression
- eccentric and compulsory behaviour.

There can be a great differences in how these problems manifest and express themselves in each individual child. Most problems of most kids are related to social interaction but others have the problem of not being able to use flexible thinking.

The difficulties that the children meet, vary. Difficulties in language and expression can entail that some children never speak at all while other children speak endlessly about their favorite subjects. A child with autism experiences the world in a different way from others. By being conscious of the difficulty the child is experiencing, people can influence it's surroundings and help the child to cope with obstacles in a world that is dominated by people that are not autistic.

Social interaction

An autistic child can be:

- hyperactive or/and underactive
- active but in a special way
- sensitive to the presence of others
- indifferent
- anxious.

The child can experience difficulties with:

- taking turns and sharing with others
- to experience oneself as a part of a group and the child may tend to take everything personally that is said to the group as a whole, for instance during classes
- cooperating and acknowledging what others have to say, the child emphasizes it's own role and has a need to control
- to understand and adapt to social conventions and rules
- to react to the pressure of peers and to know when it is being teased or used for someone elses gain
- to understand the intentions of others
- to understand the needs of others, feelings and thoughts
- to begin social interaction
- to participate and to create a game with others
- to have empathy with or to feel happy for others
- social debate taking place because the child is thinking about details and has

difficulties in seeing and understanding the whole picture

- interaction with peers, but interaction with those that are older or younger, usually works better.

Language and expression (interaction)

An autistic child might:

- use a way of communication that few understand
- have a limited understanding of the purpose and power of communication
- show limited body language and face expressions (too much or too little) and have little understanding of those factors in others
- have an unusual eye contact that does not seem reciprocal
- not enjoy looking others in the eye
- have difficulties in starting, maintaining and finishing a conversation, and not realizing what is too little or too much information depending on circumstances
- have an unusual voice or an unusual tone of voice, monotonous, too high or too low
- have a formal way of speech
- use words in a strange manner and have an unusual vocabulary that is sometimes tainted by specific interests
- speak in phrases or speak like an echo
- have difficulties in using pronouns and therefore repeating what others say for instance: You want milk, when the child means: I want milk
- have a tendency to use learned phrases in conversation (possibly from cartoons or advertisements), that sometimes has the effect of making the child seem to know more than it does
- difficulties in asking questions and following guidelines

It is possible that the child:

- only communicates to meet it's own needs
- only talks about things but not it's own feelings or ideas
- needs time to process oral information and answers late
- does not understand the need to share information
- has a literal understanding of speech, and does not understand hidden meaning for instance when the child is told the following: „Go and ask mom whether she wants a cup of coffee“. The child goes and asks but does not return with the answer
- it has difficulties in remembering and following multiple messages
- has difficulties in greeting people properly
- has difficulties in focusing on one voice when other noise or other voices are in the background
- does not understand the need to answer it's own name.

Eccentric and compulsory behaviour

An autistic child can have difficulties with:

- seeing any reason for participating in anything else than that which is directly related to it's own interest
- being afraid of changes, needing routine
- having an unusual imagination
- invent it's own imaginary world, that can be limited and compulsory

- have a perfectionistic complex and the child can be unable to admit loss in a game or to admit it's own mistakes
- have difficulties in having special interests that provide satisfaction and relaxation
- be a late speaker, writer and reader, ...

Some autistic children:

- are super sensitive
- show inappropriate feelings like laughing when someone cries
- have little intuition towards their own feelings
- can seem self-centric and rude
- repeat bodily movements such as turning around or waving the hands
- have involuntary muscle spasms
- love sensory stimuli such as wheels that turn, threads that are spinning and blinking lights
- get very scared if there is a high and unusual noise or changes in their surroundings
- want human touch according to their own terms
- have to locate themselves by knocking on walls or furniture
- have difficulties in standing in line
- do not react or show exaggerated reactions to pain
- are sensitive to the surface of foods and need to eat every food separately
- have difficulties in learning how to use the toilet.

Strengths

In spite of all the social difficulties that children with autism face every day, they often have strengths that can be useful in school and in play.

Children with autism:

- can have special gifts, for instance in music, art, languages or mathematics
- often have exceptionally good visual memory
- continue learning and developing their skills into their adulthood
- love humor (often black humor)
- enjoy routine
- often show great skill and knowledge in their areas of interest.

It is very unlikely that the same child shows or develops all the characteristics mentioned here above. It is usual for the difficulties to diminish with support and with more maturity.

This text is from a brochure published by Umsjónarfélagi einhverfra. The brochure is written by the following members:

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Umsjónarfélag einhverfra was founded in 1977, and the members are parents, relatives, professionals, and everyone that cares about autism and about the people that are disabled in the way that they fall on the autistic spectrum. Those disabilities that are classified as being on the autistic spectrum, are the disabilities that fall under the international classification ICD10.

Umsjónarfélag einhverfra (The Icelandic Autistic Society)

Umsjónarfélag einhverfra was founded in 1977 by parents and professionals. The society is the organized interest group of people with autism, relatives, professionals and those that are interested in the interests of people on the autism spectrum. Umsjónarfélagið gives lectures and educational guidance, courses and has support groups for it's members. Over the wintertime, there are working support groups for parents, autistic women, and a support group for people on the spectrum older than 18 years old, and a recreational and leisure group for the age 12-18 years old.

The operations of the society have been mainly focused on improving services to individuals with autism and related disabilities. A lot of emphasis has been made in participating fully in developing the services that are available for this group. A committee on behalf of the Ministry of Welfare that discussed the future organisation of services for individuals with autism, completed it's assignment in 1996. Two representatives of the society sat on that committee. It is important that parents and other relatives are aware of the rights of their children and that they protect their rights. If you are not satisfied with the service that your child is receiveing, we encourage you to contact us, wherever you are located in Iceland.

The society has emphasized education and presentations and it owns a lot of books and a few video cassettes that can be borrowed. The society receives news bulletins from it's sister societies in Scandinavia and subscribes to several magazines on autism.

One of the goals of the society is to be a venue for reciprocal support for the relatives of those with autism, as it is very important for people to meet, discuss things, compare things, and provide support. You are not alone. Please contact us, we can be of assistance to each other.

The office of the society is at Háaleitisbraut 13, 108 Reykjavík. The telephone number is 5621590. The office hours are wednesday from 9 to 15 and on Fridays from 9 to 12. The society's e-mail address is: einhverfa@einhverfa.is