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**A PARENT'S GUIDE
TO AUTISM**

A Parent's Guide To Autism

BY ANGELA WEST, M.S., BCBA, LBA



restricted behaviors. Signs of autism can be observed as early as 1 year to 2 years old. Your child's pediatrician can begin monitoring your baby for developmental or communication difficulties at your child's first wellness visit. The pediatrician can monitor developmental milestones, interactions, family history and more to help identify the risk of ASD.

Some children may exhibit only a few symptoms while some may show several; each child is unique. Recognizing signs can help get your child screened as early as possible. Key indicators of ASD could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Not responding to his or her name being called.
- Not interested in other children or interested in communicating.
- Not maintaining consistent eye contact.
- Not understanding simple instructions ("show me the cat").
- Not interested in pretend play or rarely engaging in it.
- Rarely pointing at objects.
- Displaying repetitive movements (finger dancing, rocking, spinning or walking on the toes).
- Getting upset quickly with a change in routine.
- Having sensory sensitivity (only eating specific color or textured foods or getting upset by certain sounds).
- Exhibiting one or more inappropriate facial expressions.
- Demonstrating speech delays or regression of developmental milestones.

It is important to note that the number and severity of symptoms differ from one child to another. Not every child will have the same signs. It is best to avoid the comparison game by comparing your child to other children. Autism is not a disease. It simply means your child is wired differently and may need more specialized ways to cope, thrive and develop.

What are the first steps if you suspect your child may be exhibiting signs of ASD?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the nation and affects approximately one in 54 children. Early intervention for children diagnosed with autism is pivotal in helping them learn, cope and discover new possibilities. Knowing the key indicators of ASD and the first steps in getting screened helps countless children avoid the pitfall of having a late diagnosis and misunderstanding.

Autism is notable for deficits in social skills, communication and repetitive or

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"Autism is not a disease. It simply means your child may need more specialized ways to help him or her cope, thrive and develop."

Angela West, founder and chief clinical officer Behavioral Framework

1. Trust yourself. As a parent and caregiver, you know your child better than anyone. If you have suspicions, don't be hesitant to follow your instincts and talk to a doctor.

2. Observe. Make notes of what triggers your child's behavior. The more observation you can provide, the more it will help doctors with screening and diagnosis. Make a note of what event or trigger upsets your child. What provides comfort? What amuses him or her?

3. Call the doctor. Call your pediatrician to set up a visit to discuss your concerns.

4. Act now. Early intervention is critical in getting your child the resources needed to help your child learn, develop and thrive. The sooner the process is started, the better.

5. Do your homework. If a diagnosis of ASD is confirmed after screening, then the next steps begin. As each child is unique, each child's therapy plan should be tailored accordingly. Many types of treatment

therapies exist that may involve speech therapists, occupational therapists and behavioral analysts. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), for example, is a proven, research-based therapy that helps improve learning, social and communication skills. Many experts consider ABA therapy the primary and most effective treatment for those diagnosed with ASD.

Love your child unconditionally. Take one day at a time and ask as many questions as possible to get the answers you and your child need. ■

Angela West, M.S., BCBA, LBA, founder and chief clinical officer of Behavioral Framework, is board-certified and licensed as a behavior analyst in both Virginia and Maryland. With more than 15 years of mental health and ABA experience, she has a diverse knowledge of special programming, behavior management and developing and expanding ABA programs in the Maryland and Northern Virginia areas.

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