



GROWING UP

# Together

TEENS WITH AUTISM

When you're a teenager you find your unique identity and figure out your relationship to the world and to others. When you meet someone who doesn't fit the mold of what's considered "normal," you might be tempted to avoid them, gossip with your friends about them or judge them without any valid or real reason.

If a person does not seem like your other classmates or fit your expectations of "normal" behavior, consider if they might have autism or another disability. There are a growing number of people who have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, including Asperger's Syndrome. More than ever before, students with all types of disabilities are attending your school and are in your class.

With your acceptance and help, a student with autism can do well at school and fit in with classmates. With some understanding, a little assistance and inclusion in social activities, teens with autism may become great friends.

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism (also referred to as autism spectrum disorder or ASD) is a neurological disorder that affects the way a person's brain and body works. As it is a spectrum disorder, no two people will have the same symptoms and characteristics. In other words, just like other teenagers, not all people with ASD are the same. It is also important to know that autism is not a disease and is not contagious.

A person with ASD may have difficulty communicating with other people, making friends or following directions. Sometimes a person with ASD may have trouble understanding what is going on if they are overwhelmed by lights, noises, movements and smells. Certain things may make them upset, and they may not know how to calm down or tell you what's bothering them. Some people with ASD may not understand "common sense" things you take for granted. However, with help from teachers, classmates, families and friends, teens with ASD can find it easier to attend school in spite of these challenges.

## WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

No one knows exactly why some people have autism. There may be many different causes. Scientists are still trying to find out what those causes are and how to best help people with ASD. Approximately 1,500,000 people in the United States have an autism spectrum disorder—that's 1 out of every 150 people. ASD can affect anyone, regardless of race, religion, economic status or where they live; however, it is more common in boys than in girls.



## How are Teens with ASD Unique?

Many teens with ASD have similar dreams and goals as you and I. There may be only subtle differences in some individuals, while other people diagnosed with ASD might be very different from you. Some classmates may have difficulties with certain activities due to their disability, but may have strengths in other areas. For example, a teen with ASD may be a computer or science whiz, but may have difficulty in social situations or playing on a sports team. Some teens with ASD may:

- Misunderstand rules or get anxious when rules are not followed exactly.
- Follow certain routines, such as always sitting in the same place in the cafeteria or always taking the same route to class.
- Have an intense desire to pursue an interest and become very focused on a particular thing, such as a video game, mythology or sports facts.
- Have a hard time coping with everyday challenges, such as schedule changes.
- Not be able to make eye contact, or may stare or make eye contact that is too intense when talking to you.
- React strongly or become overwhelmed by things like noisy cafeterias and gymnasiums, fire alarms, crowded hallways or bright fluorescent lights.
- Not recognize or protect themselves from bullying or teasing at school, in public or on the Internet.
- Be very concrete, literal thinkers and may not understand sarcasm, slang or jokes.
- May stand too close when talking and may not be able to take the “hint” that the conversation is done.
- May make comments that seem rude without understanding their social impact (*for example, “you have bad breath”*).
- Appear to not care or be unaware of other people’s feelings.
- Want to make friends, but might not want to talk about things other than his/her special interests. You should realize they are trying to connect and might be at a loss for other topics to talk about.
- Not be able to interpret facial expressions, such as when the teacher gives a meaningful look to signal that it is time to be quiet.

## Why Do Teens with ASD Act This Way?

Teens with ASD may act in some unusual ways; however, they are typically not choosing to misbehave or act peculiar. They may be having a hard time controlling their behavior because they have difficulty understanding expectations or dealing with the world around them. They also may not be aware of their behavior or that it is perceived as unusual.

## How Do Teens with ASD Communicate?

Teens with ASD may have a problem with receptive communication. This means that they may not always understand everything that is being said to them, may need some extra time to process what is being said or may become confused when someone says too much at once. To communicate more effectively with a person with ASD, make an effort to:

- Speak slowly and use simple words.
- Allow extra time for the person with ASD to process and develop an answer.
- Speak in direct and positive language that tells the person what to do (*“stand still” instead of “don’t move”*).
- Try not to use sarcasm, slang or implied meanings (*such as “get over it,” “let’s hang out,” “put a sock in it” or “take a chill pill”*).

Teens with ASD may also have expressive communication challenges, which means they are unable to “express” what they are thinking or feeling. Some may not talk at all, but may communicate using gestures and other behaviors. Others may use a communication board to spell out words or a small computer that speaks for them. Expressive communication is how someone “talks” to others and relays a message or thought. Although they may understand what is being said, they may have difficulty figuring out how to respond. Never assume just because someone doesn’t talk that they don’t understand or aren’t smart. A teen with ASD may:

- Not be able to speak and might use another form of communication, such as sign language or an electronic device.
- Use formal and very precise language, which makes them sound different than your other friends.
- Repeat a phrase he or she has heard from a movie, video or previous conversation, sometimes without knowing what it means. The phrase may have no relevance or may contain a response that seems inappropriate.
- Have difficulty staying on topic during a conversation.
- Have difficulty starting a conversation.
- Say something that sounds rude. It is probably not meant that way, but teens with ASD can be brutally honest.
- Forget to use greetings and closings, such as “hello” and “goodbye.”
- Have difficulty understanding when to begin and end conversations, and when it is their turn to talk.

## How Can I Be a Friend?

When you become a friend to a person with ASD, you can both learn a lot from each other. Here are some ideas to help you be a better friend:

- Accept your friend’s differences.
- Protect your friend from things that bother him or her (*for example, loud noises or fluorescent lighting*).
- Join your friend in activities that interest him or her.
- Speak in a manner that is age-appropriate. Don’t use “baby talk.”
- Be patient and understand that your friend doesn’t mean to bother you or others.





- Protect your friend when others try to bully or make him or her do something that is not appropriate.
- Give your friend extra time to answer your question or complete an activity.
- Invite your friend to join you in group activities, such as going to the movies, hanging out with other friends, or attending sporting or school events.
- Help other teens learn about and accept autism.

Some individuals may have extreme and problematic behaviors that include screaming, hitting themselves or others, or destroying property. Realize that these behaviors may be their only way of communicating pain, confusion or their desire for attention. When these behaviors occur, you should call on an adult to assist. You can help by helping others to understand why the behavior occurred and hopefully avoid the situation in the future.

Finally, realize that your friend with ASD may have information or skills that you can learn from as well. Some of these individuals have exceptional talents in math, music, art or other areas. If you take the time to be a friend with someone with ASD, you might find you can learn a lot and enjoy spending time together. These are wonderful people to get to know. Remember, a student with ASD is really just another teenager who wants to be respected as an individual, have friends and have fun.

## RESOURCES

For more information about ASD, look for these and other books written by or for teens in your local library:

- Bristow, C. (2008). *My strange and terrible malady*. Shawnee Mission, Kan.: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.
- Burrows, E.L., & Wagner, S.J. (2004). *Understanding Asperger's syndrome: Fast facts—a guide for teachers and educators to address the needs of the student*. Arlington, Texas.: Future Horizons.
- Haddon, M. (2004). *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries.
- Jackson, L. (2002). *Freaks, geeks and Asperger syndrome: A user guide to adolescence*. London & New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Keating-Velasco, J.L. (2007). *A is for autism, F is for friend: A kid's book on making friends with a child who has autism*. Shawnee Mission, Kan.: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.
- Keating-Velasco, J.L. (2008). *In his shoes: A short journey through autism*. Shawnee Mission, Kan.: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.
- Ledgin, N. (2002). *Asperger's and self-esteem: Insight and hope through famous role models*. Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons.
- Shore, S.M., Rastelli, L.G., & Grandin, T. (2006). *Understanding autism for dummies*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Publishing, Inc.



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