

What is Autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disorder that can begin at any point in childhood, from early infancy onward, and which can last throughout a person's lifetime. The term "autism" is used to designate a group of disorders known as "autism spectrum disorders."

Individuals suffering with autism disorders characteristically withdraw inwardly and experience difficulty in communicating and interacting socially with others. The symptoms of autism range from mild to severe. In its most severe forms, autism manifests in extreme withdrawal, with little or no social interaction and the repetition of obsessive routines and behaviors. In its milder forms, autism is evidenced in symptoms such as pervasive developmental disorders, Asperger's syndrome, Rett syndrome, and childhood disintegrative disorders. Some individuals diagnosed with mild forms of autism can lead relatively normal lives, but have moved inward and experience difficulty making friends and manifesting their potentials.

The incidence of autism is increasing on a yearly basis. Today it is estimated that one in 150 children will be diagnosed with some form of autism. The first signs typically emerge when children fail to meet appropriate developmental benchmarks. Later, it can be diagnosed when children experience extreme difficulty socializing and interact-

ing with others. Some parents comment their child seemed to be "different" from birth, while others say their child was developing naturally and then lost their ability to interact at a later age.

Currently a great deal of uncertainty surrounds the question of autism. The medical literature offers no explanation for its possible causes. There are no known means to prevent it, no entirely effective treatments, and no cure. The available programs focus on developing communication, social, and cognitive skills using behavioral or educational methods. Although these early intervention methods have proven a certain measure of success, they have not been entirely effective in overcoming the disorder.

SIGNS OF AUTISM:

The following are signs to look for to determine whether your child may be developing autism:

- ◆ Your child does not smile or exhibit joyful expressions by six months or older.
- ◆ Your child does not imitate sounds, smiles, or other facial expressions by nine months.
- ◆ Your child does not babble or make efforts toward verbal expression by 12 months or older.
- ◆ Your child does not imitate gestures, such as pointing, showing, reaching, or waving by 12 months or older.