

The Daily Union

Title: April – A Month for Autism Awareness

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"It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a child with autism to raise the consciousness of the village." Althea C.

April is World Autism Month, which has been established internationally to help increase understanding and acceptance of those who have been diagnosed with this exceptionality.

Autism (medically known as Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD) is a very complex developmental disability. The diagnosis for autism is based on multiple evaluations by a physician combined with the observations from the child's caregiver based on day-to-day activities and interactions. ASD is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a "spectrum condition." This means that autism affects individuals differently and to varying degrees. A national advocacy and education resource for ASD, the *Autism Society* describes some of the behaviors associated with this disorder:

- Delayed learning of language
- Difficulty making eye contact or holding a conversation
- Difficulty with executive functioning (working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control, for example) which relates to reasoning and planning
- Narrow, intense interests
- Poor motor skills' and sensory sensitivities

As a spectrum disorder, any presence of some, all, or a combination of these characteristics can be observed in a person with autism. The diagnosis of ASD is based on the analysis of a person's behavior and the severity of those behaviors.

According to a sponsoring nonprofit organization for World Autism Month, *Autism Speaks*, autism affects an estimated 1 in 59 children in the United States. Around the world, autism affects more than 70 million people. Although autism can be reliably diagnosed around age 2, the average age of diagnosis remains at age 4. For most people, autism is a lifelong condition, but the earlier it is diagnosed the sooner an appropriate educational and treatment program can be put into place.

When a family member is diagnosed with autism, everyone in the family unit is affected. Parents/caregivers will need to shift their focus on helping their child with ASD work on the various parts of a treatment and educational plan. The stress that accompanies this extra demand can strain the relationships in the family. It can make a significant impact on their finances, work, relationships with other children and even their extended family. A shift in the family's resources, such as money and time, is

required to help the child with autism receive what they need to adapt to their environment AND to help the family and circles of support adapt to the child.

Parents can take a positive first step by simply becoming more aware of what an autism diagnosis means and then educating other family members and close friends about the disorder. It is important that the family and their support system understand the challenges the family will face, the levels impact it will have other children in the family, as well as how it will stretch the family's resources. Creating a network of help and understanding by communicating this information is essential for the family.

Family and friends may have many questions about Autism Spectrum Disorder. Parents/caregivers can help inform their circle of support by having their answers ready.

Autism Spectrum Disorder Q&A

Q: What causes ASD?

A: There is no known single cause for ASD. However, it is generally accepted that it is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function based on research collected from brain scans of affected children. Researchers are also investigating links to heredity, genetics, and medical problems.

Q: How is ASD diagnosed?

A: There are no medical tests that diagnose ASD. Instead of having blood drawn for lab evaluation, ASD diagnosis is based on observations of the child/person's communication, social interaction, and his or her activities and interests.

Q: How common is an ASD diagnosis?

A: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 1 percent of the world population has autism spectrum disorder.

Q: Why am I hearing more about autism in the news?

A: The prevalence of autism is growing exponentially. Autism in U.S. children spiked by 119.4% from 2000 (1 in 150) to 2010 (1 in 68) and continues to rise.

Q: What does an autism diagnosis mean for the child as they get older?

A: It depends on where that child falls on the spectrum. Children can participate in individualized education plans (IEP) while in school to help the child and their classroom environment adapt to the child's need and cognitive ability. However, post high school offers a less adaptive environment. Unemployment among young adults with ASD is high following high school graduation. Over one third of young adults with autism have not had a job or received higher education after leaving high school.

Information for the Q&A was adapted from the Autism Society website: <https://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/>

Not only do family and friends offer a system of support to a child with ASD, the community can be a source of support, as well. The community in which people with ASD live can strive to be accepting of all exceptionalities, not just autism. As individual community members learn more about ASD and the needs and challenges of others who have disabilities, the more comfortable and accepted those individuals will feel.

If you want to be part of the village that understands, encourages, and supports families affected by an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, you can learn more about ASD on the National Institute of Health's Institute of Neurological Health and Stroke website: <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/>. You will find a search box on the homepage where you can type in Autism Spectrum Disorder. Using resources such as this one can help you be part of a village of support. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!