



**WESTERN CAPE  
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PERSONS WITH  
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adding  
value  
to  
lives

## Focus on...

### WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a lifelong, complex condition that occurs as a result of disordered brain growth, structure and development. Autism is believed to stem from a genetic predisposition triggered by environmental factors and affects 4-5 times more boys than girls. There are a vast number of ways that a person can manifest their autism and as a result this condition is now more often referred to as "Autism Spectrum Disorders" (ASD).

### TYPES OF AUTISM

In broad terms, there are 2 main "types" of autism on the spectrum; "Kanner/Classic Autism" where in addition to the autism, there is also intellectual impairment. Statistically, it is considered that 76% of people with autism have "Kanner/Classic" Autism (i.e also have intellectual impairments in varying degrees), where as 24% of people with autism do not have any intellectual impairments, nor speech delay in early childhood years and these people are classified as having "Asperger Syndrome", displaying a "normal" or more than often, above average intellectual ability.

### TRIAD OF IMPAIRMENTS

Regardless of the manifestation of autism, ALL people on this spectrum, are affected in different degrees, by the "Triad of Impairments" that causes a disturbance in quality of development in the following areas:-

1. Language and Communication. 40% of people with "Kanner/Classic autism" never speak nor fully understand verbal communication. People with Asperger Syndrome with seemingly fluent speech will have areas of their communicative abilities that are adversely affected; for instance an extreme difficulty in reading non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, body language etc.

2. Social Interaction. For a person with autism, the area of the brain that enables us to understand other people's emotions and feelings is altered and thus a person with autism cannot fully understand the complexity of the thoughts of people around them and the resulting social interactions.

# Autism

3. Imagination and Creative Play. A person with autism usually becomes trapped by rigid thought patterns and behaviours. Difficulty in understanding abstract concepts and the day-to-day jargon we regularly use flippantly in conversation, such as "It is Raining Cats and Dogs", "Throw the baby out with the bathwater", "I nearly died laughing" .....

### RED FLAGS FOR POSSIBLE AUTISM IN A YOUNG CHILD

- \* No babbling by 11 months of age
- \* No simple gestures by 12 months (e.g., waving bye-bye)
- \* No single words by 16 months
- \* No 2-word phrases by 24 months (noun + verb - e.g., "baby sleeping")
- \* No response when name is called, causing concern about hearing
- \* Loss of any language or social skills at any age
- \* Rarely makes eye contact when interacting with people
- \* Does not play peek-a-boo
- \* Doesn't point to show things he/she is interested in
- \* Rarely smiles socially
- \* More interested in looking at objects than at people's faces
- \* Prefers to play alone
- \* Doesn't make attempts to get parent's attention; doesn't follow/look when someone is pointing at something
- \* Seems to be "in his/her own world"
- \* Odd or repetitive ways of moving fingers or hands
- \* Oversensitive to certain textures, sounds or lights
- \* Lack of interest in toys, or plays with them in an unusual way (e.g., lining up, spinning, opening/closing parts rather than using the toy as a whole)
- \* Compulsions or rituals (has to perform activities in a special way or certain sequence; is prone to tantrums if rituals are interrupted)
- \* Preoccupations with unusual interests, such as light switches, doors, fans, wheels.

### TREATMENT

There is no cure for autism, nor is there one single treatment for autism spectrum disorders. But there are ways to help minimize the symptoms of autism and to maximize learning. However, there is no reason why they cannot enjoy a good quality of life.