

Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It is a neurological disorder, which presents itself in a variety of symptoms that affect individuals differently. Autism knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries.

People with autism typically have difficulties with communication, sensory input, and appropriate behaviors, as well as deficits in social understanding.

Autism affects nearly 450 children and youth and an unknown number of adults in Howard County, and as many as 1.5 million persons nationwide.

Autism in Howard County

The incidence of autism in Howard County is increasing.

Over 1 in 150 students in Howard County public schools is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

While the Howard County Public School System's overall enrollment increased 18% in the past 10 years, the number of children with autism in county schools has increased 180%.

Howard County Autism Society
10280 Old Columbia Road, Suite 215
Columbia, MD 21046
www.howard-autism.org

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Columbia, MD 21045

Helping Individuals with Autism



www.howard-autism.org

10280 Old Columbia Road, Suite 215
Columbia, MD 21046
phone: 410-290-3466
fax: 410-290-5455

Recognizing Persons with Autism

- ♦ May be non-verbal or may only repeat what is said to them; may communicate with sign language, picture cards or gestures.
- ♦ May say they understand information or may appear to comprehend when they do not.
- ♦ May use words incorrectly when agitated and say the opposite of what they mean.
- ♦ May appear argumentative, stubborn or belligerent; may say “No!” in response to all questions; may ask “Why” incessantly.
- ♦ May have monotone voice with unusual pronunciations or pronoun reversal; will often have difficulty using correct volume for situation.
- ♦ May be fixated on favorite topic or ask questions repeatedly when uncomfortable.
- ♦ Verbal individuals are unusually honest, but are often blunt and may appear rude.
- ♦ May give misleading statements or false confessions due to a lack of understanding or a desire to end the situation.
- ♦ May not respond to “Stop” command, may run or move away when approached, may cover ears and look away constantly.
- ♦ May have difficulty judging personal space; may avoid eye contact or have an atypical fixed gaze.
- ♦ May have sensory sensitivity issues (e.g. flashing lights, sirens, crowds) that produce fight or flight response or escalation of repetitive or inappropriate behaviors. Examples of such behaviors are pacing, hand flapping, self-injurious behaviors, or screaming.
- ♦ May not recognize danger or painful stimuli and may have minimal self-help skills.
- ♦ May be unable to distinguish between minor and serious problems.

- ♦ May appear impaired, as if high or drunk or having a psychotic episode.
- ♦ May have associated medical condition such as seizure disorders or low muscle tone.
- ♦ May toe walk or have pigeon-toed gait or running style.
- ♦ May attempt to present an autism information card; may wear medical alert jewelry or have information sewn or imprinted on clothes.

Suggested Responses

During situations or encounters with persons on the autism spectrum, the following responses should be considered:

- ♦ Talk in direct, short phrases, such as “Stand up now. Go to the car.” Avoid language that may appear threatening.
- ♦ Allow for delayed responses to questions, directions, or commands.
- ♦ Avoid idioms, and other abstract expressions such as: ‘Are you pulling my leg?’
- ♦ Do not insist on eye contact as this may be painful to the individual.
- ♦ Talk calmly. Talking louder will not help understanding. Model calming body language, slow breathing, and keeping your hands low.
- ♦ If possible, avoid touching person, especially near the face and shoulders. Avoid standing too near or behind the person; avoid stopping repetitive behaviors unless there is risk of injury to self or others.
- ♦ Evaluate for injury; the person may not ask for help or show indications of pain, even if injury seems apparent.

- ♦ Examine for presence of medical alert jewelry or tags.
- ♦ Gesture slowly for attention, avoid rapid pointing or waving, and reassure person you are not going to hurt them.
- ♦ If person’s behavior escalates, maintain a safe distance until any inappropriate behaviors lessen, but remain alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive acts.
- ♦ Consider use of sign language or picture or phrase books.

Reference

“Avoiding Unfortunate Situations” by Dennis Debbaudt, 1994.

For more information or to discuss training on autism spectrum disorders, contact:

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