

## Autism: It May Not Be What You Think

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There are many misconceptions about autism. Many people believe that if a trend or characteristic is common in children with autism, that it must be a diagnosing factor of the disorder. However, every case is unique, and the presence or absence of a trend or characteristic is not in itself a defining factor. Below are ten common misconceptions and realities about autism:



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**Myth:** All children with autism are nonverbal, will never talk, or could talk if they wanted to.

**Reality:** Many children with autism do improve their verbal skills, often through interventions such as speech-language therapy. In addition, talking is only one way of communicating. With early intervention and identification, these children can develop other functional ways of communicating. They can supplement their lack of or reduced verbal skills with pictures, alternative/augmentative communication devices, computers, and/or sign language (South Carolina Autism Society, n.d., ¶ 3).

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**Myth:** All children with autism have intellectual disability.

**Reality:** It is foolish to assume that children with autism who have difficulty communicating have an intellectual disability. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.*, (1994) mental retardation is characterized “by significantly subaverage intellectual functioning (an IQ of about 70 or below)” (p.41); whereas the diagnostic criteria for autism looks at six or more items in impairment, including lack of spoken language, reduced social interaction, and lack of emotion—there is no specific reference to IQ (p.75). However, some children with autism may have some degree of mental retardation.

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**Myth:** All children with autism are “geniuses,” have a gift or talent, or are intelligent.

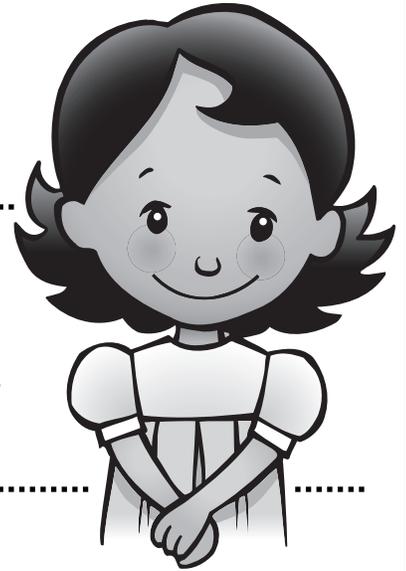
**Reality:** Children with autism may have a varied range of IQ scores. Some children with autism may exhibit extraordinary skills such as remembering a wide range of dates and events, adding large numbers without a calculator, or playing Bach and Beethoven on the piano by age three (Sicile-Kira, 2004, p.3). However, these same children may have difficulty with change, new routines, and maintaining a conversation. Just like everyone else, children with autism have their strengths and weaknesses.

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**Myth:** Children with autism cannot learn.

**Reality:** Figuring out how children with autism learn is often a challenge. Some are visual learners. Others learn by physical performance. And others learn mostly by listening. When given support and an appropriate teaching style, many children with autism can learn.

**Myth:** Children with autism do not make eye contact.

**Reality:** Contrary to popular belief, many children with autism do make eye contact. However, it may be less frequent and more of a visual gesture than a way to communicate intent (Autism Society of America, n.d., ¶ 6).



**Myth:** Children who demonstrate excessive disruptive behaviors, such as having tantrums, hitting, and throwing items, have autism (East Tennessee State University, n.d., ¶ 1).

**Reality:** The disruptive behaviors may or may not be a result of autism. It is important to look at the reasons why children might behave this way in addition to any diagnosis.

**Myth:** Children will “outgrow” autism.

**Reality:** Autism is not something that can be “outgrown.” With effective treatment, children may show significant progress and improve their ability to carry out their activities of daily living more functionally.

**Myth:** Children with autism cannot show affection.

**Reality:** Just because children may not be able to verbally express feelings does not mean that they are incapable of conveying emotion. Understanding how children with autism convey feelings takes patience and hard work (SCAS, n.d., ¶ 4). Once a caregiver/teacher learns and understands the way(s) children with autism can express emotion, the reward can be priceless.

**Myth:** All children with autism have sensory issues.

**Reality:** Many children with autism have sensory issues such as limited physical contact or repetitive body movements. However, children without autism have sensory deficits as well. The presence or absence of a sensory component alone cannot diagnose autism.

**Myth:** Autism can be cured with special diets.

**Reality:** Many professionals and parents who place children with autism on special diets claim to have seen significant progress. However, there is no conclusive data supporting special diets as a cure.

#### Resources

American Psychiatric Association (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Autism Society of America (n.d.). *Characteristics of autism*. Retrieved December 22, 2008, from [http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about\\_what\\_is\\_char](http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_what_is_char)

East Tennessee State University (n.d.). *Autism: Myths*. Retrieved December 22, 2008, from <http://www.etsu.edu/cpah/commdis/AutismSociety/myth.asp>

Sicile-Kira, C. (2004). *Autism spectrum disorders: The complete guide to understanding autism, Asperger's syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, and other asd's*. Perigee: USA.

South Carolina Autism Society (n.d.). *Myths, fables, stories, legends, fiction, and misunderstandings*. Retrieved December 30, 2008, from <http://www.etsu.edu/cpah/commdis/AutismSociety/myth.asp>



**Helpful Products**

The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when working with children who have special needs. Visit [www.superduperinc.com](http://www.superduperinc.com) or call 1-800-277-8737. Click the links below to see the product description.

*Autism: A Guide for Educators, Clinicians, and Parents*

Ask for Item #TP-297

<http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=TP297>

*I Have Autism – A Child's First Look at Autism*

Ask for Item #BK-329

<http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=BK329>