

# Debunking myths about autism

November 4 2015

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This past October was Canadian Autism Awareness Month. While studies show as many as one in every 165 Canadians has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), many people do not understand the disorder.

ASD is the name for a specific group of behavioural and developmental challenges that affect a [child's social behaviour](#), communication and play. It is caused by rare genetic variants that influence how the brain grows and develops. Since [autism](#) is a spectrum disorder, each person's symptoms differ in variety and severity.

Dr. Peter Szatmari, Chief, Child & Youth Mental Health Collaborative, diagnoses and provides treatment recommendations for children with ASD every day. He helped us bust some autism myths and misconceptions.

## **MYTH: There is an autism epidemic.**

FACT: The prevalence of those diagnosed with ASD has gone up about tenfold since the mid-1980s, but it is important to note the increase is largely associated with changes in the diagnostic criteria and a greater awareness in the medical community of how autism presents at different ages. There is no evidence that there is any environmental factor that might account for the increase in prevalence.

## **MYTH: Vaccines cause ASD.**

FACT: It is very clear that autism is not caused by vaccines. The initial

paper published on this topic has been disproved. This claim has now been recognized as fraudulent and biased by the pursuit of class action lawsuits. In fact, there are several communities where the ingredients that were reported to cause autism have been removed from the vaccine and yet within those communities the diagnosis of autism continues to rise.

### **MYTH: ASD is caused by poor parenting.**

FACT: This myth comes out of very poor research from the 1950s, which was already being widely refuted by the 1960s. There is absolutely no evidence that poor parenting or poor parent-child relationships cause autism. ASD is caused by genetic factors, possibly combined with environmental factors in utero.

### **MYTH: Only boys can have autism.**

FACT: The sex ratio in ASD is roughly four boys to every girl. So it is certainly true that girls can have ASD, but they tend to be more severely affected than boys. However, this may be because girls with ASD are not as readily recognized. In fact, some evidence suggests we should be using different diagnostic criteria for girls than for boys to take account of these variations.

### **MYTH: ASD can be cured with diet or other alternative treatments.**

FACT: We have to be careful here. Whether autism can be "cured" or not is contentious, but there is no question that children with ASD improve the earlier they get the intervention and the more intense that intervention might be.

## **MYTH: People with ASD do not feel or like to socialize.**

FACT: Children with ASD do socialize and feel emotions, but the communication and the expression of those emotions is atypical. Their desire to socialize with people might not be as intense as it is in typically developing children. Nevertheless older children, adolescents and young adults with ASD do enjoy interacting with other children and adolescents and do seek them out.

## **MYTH: ASD gives people savant or genius abilities.**

FACT: The use of the word "savant" comes from older research suggesting that although there are some people with autism who are non-verbal or have severe cognitive disability, they nevertheless have a fantastic memory, a capacity for drawing, an ability to do elaborate calculations and can read much better than expected. That is certainly true for a tiny minority of people with ASD, but it is better to refer to these as splinter skills rather than "savant" or "genius." The definition of a genius is having an IQ above 120 and, while this is certainly possible for people with ASD, it is much less likely than in the general population

## **MYTH: Autistic children should only attend separate special needs programs.**

FACT: Children with ASD benefit from interactions with typical children because it improves their social and communication skills and decreases their repetitive play. So the treatment recommendation now is to keep children in the educational mainstream and only withdraw them under exceptional circumstances, for short periods of time. All children with ASD require a special education plan that takes their disability into account.

## **MYTH: You should try to stop an autistic child's repetitive behaviour.**

FACT: The important issue here is to understand the function of that repetitive behaviour. Sometimes children engage in repetitive behaviour because they are bored, stressed or playing. The key treatment here is to try and modify that repetitive behaviour so that it becomes more developmentally appropriate and more like typical play. In other words, we need to understand why a child engages in repetitive play and then deal with the underlying cause instead of focusing on the behaviour itself.

## **MYTH: Children with autism cannot become independent adults.**

FACT: The range of outcome possibilities for children with ASD is quite remarkable. Many [children](#) with ASD grow up to be adults who live independently, who work, who develop close friendships, even romantic relationships. It is likely that most adults with ASD will always require some kind of support, but this can sometimes be done at a distance. It is also true that there are many individuals with ASD who require full-time, specialized services as adults and those appropriate supports are available through community services.

Take a look at our infographic for more information:

# AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

## { Facts & Myths }

### DID YOU KNOW?

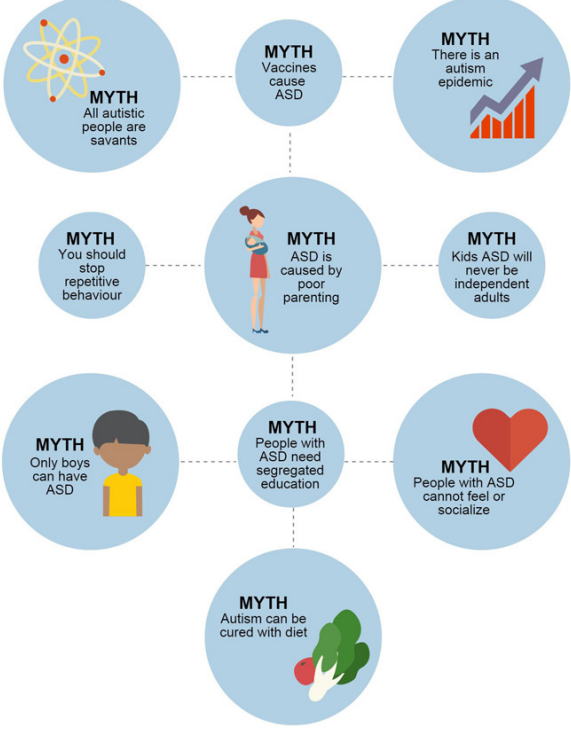


### SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Trouble socializing
- Unusual interest in objects
- Need for sameness
- Repeated actions or body movements
- Unusual emotional reactions

### COMMON MYTHS

Though doctors are still researching the causes of and treatments for ASD, there are some common misconceptions they can rule out for sure.



Provided by The Hospital for Sick Children

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