

10 Points First Responders Should Know About AUTISM

Facts about ASD:

- occurs in one in every 36 children
- is more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined
- occurs in all races, ethnicities, and social groups
- early intervention services are critical to a child's long-term success



1] Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that is characterized by communication impairments, social skills deficits, and restrictive interests and/or repetitive behavior. The range and severity of symptoms can vary widely.

2] Some autistic individuals are non-verbal or only repeat what is said to them. They may communicate with sign language, communication devices, or gestures/pointing.

3] Those autistic individuals who are verbal may not have good receptive language—they may not understand what you are saying or the questions you are asking. They may not be able to sustain a conversation or be able to successfully convey their thoughts, feelings, or experiences.

4] Autistic individuals may not seem to listen to what you say, make eye contact, or understand gestures, personal space, body language, or facial expressions.

5] Many autistic individuals do not have social awareness. They may be oblivious to others or not notice another person's distress.

6] Some autistic individuals can be aggressive, or hurt themselves. These behaviors may be their way of communicating their needs and feelings such as fear to others. If these individuals are confronted by a First Responder they may become aggressive as a way of saying, "I'm scared, leave me alone."

7] Autistic individuals may not recognize police, firefighters, or EMS workers and may not understand what you do.

8] Many autistic individuals have sensory issues, such as sensitivities to loud noises or bright lights. The lights and sirens that may be fun for neurotypical individuals may be very overwhelming for autistics. They may cover their ears or eyes, throw tantrums, or run away.

9] Many autistic individuals exhibit odd, awkward movements with their hands, head, or objects; this is called "stereotypic" behavior. As long as these behaviors are not hurting others, allow people with autism to engage in them, as they may be calming.

10] When talking to an autistic individual, speak clearly and use concise, short phrases or sentences and a calm tone. Allow for a delayed response because it may take the person a few moments to process what you have said. Avoid sarcasm and humorous statements; most autistic people will not understand them. And remember to be patient—autistic people really do want things to get better.

The National Autism Center at May Institute is dedicated to supporting effective, evidence-based treatment approaches for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and to providing direction to families, practitioners, organizations, policymakers, and funders. The Center's goal is to serve individuals with ASD by responding to the rising demand for reliable information and by providing comprehensive resources for families and communities.

For more information, contact Dr. Karie DePaolo, Assistant Director, National Autism Center at May Institute.

TEL: 781.437.1266 | EMAIL: info@nationalautismcenter.org