

Autism: Fact and Fiction

There's a lot of information floating on the Internet and other sources about autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Dr. Karen Fried, director of Developmental Pediatric Services at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago, shares what's true and false behind some of these commonly held beliefs.

Belief: Research has shown there is a definite link between early childhood vaccinations and autism.

False: "Many large, well-controlled studies have looked at whether or not there's a link between childhood vaccinations and autism," Dr. Fried says. "Studies continue to show vaccines are not associated with ASD."

Belief: The number of children diagnosed with autism is surging.

True. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2010, one in 68 children was diagnosed with ASD. In 2000, that number was just one in 150 children. The disorder is more common in boys than girls. Currently, it's estimated that one in 42 boys and one in 189 girls have been diagnosed with ASD.

Belief: Children with autism don't have emotions—including joy, sadness or love—so they may be cold and not empathetic.

False. "Children with ASD are children first and, therefore, have emotions," Dr. Fried says. "The manner in which they express those emotions may be different or unusual."

Belief: Autism can be caused by poor parenting.

False. In the 1950s, autism was thought to be caused by faulty parenting. Now, it's clear faulty parenting is not a cause of autism. Though the parenting theory still crops up from time to time, most researchers reject this theory as misguided and harmful, Dr. Fried says.

Prayer: *Tender and loving God, may we see your face in each beautiful and unique child.*

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Autism Diagnosis: Now What?

As a mother of a child with special needs, Dr. Nisha Kakodkar, a pediatrician at Advocate Dreyer in Aurora, IL, has intimately experienced the fear and concern that comes from a new diagnosis. For parents who are newly-grappling with an autism diagnosis, Dr. Kakodkar recommends the following:

Find and call upon your support system. Call upon friends and family who can be there for you, whether it's to lend a sympathetic ear, cook dinner or help care for siblings. Find a support group of parents who are going through similar experiences.

Accept your own feelings surrounding the diagnosis. From a mother of a child with autism: "It is important to remember that your child is the same child that you loved and adored yesterday, before their diagnosis. Autism is just a piece of who they are – it doesn't define them."

Ask about and look for other health issues. Children with autism may also experience a variety of other conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, sensory processing disorder, motor delays and intellectual disability.

Partner with your local school (age 3 and over) or early intervention program (under age 3) so that they can better care for him or her and augment services and support if needed.

Act quickly. Studies show that the earlier parents initiate therapy and school-based interventions, the better their autistic children do in the long-run.

Be kind to yourself. There is no known cause of autism, and your child's diagnosis is not anyone's fault. As mentioned above, it is important to get your child support through school and/or private therapy, but don't try to do everything all at once. That may overwhelm you and your child.

Enjoy your child. Take time to remember and celebrate your child for his or her own unique qualities. For a brief moment each day – make a conscious effort to leave all of the stress behind and reconnect with your child.

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