

Frequently Asked Questions: Autism Spectrum Disorders

1. Does the AAP believe that children can fully recover from autism?

Autism spectrum disorders have many biologic causes and many possible outcomes. Some children may improve over time to the extent that they might no longer meet diagnostic criteria for the disorder. Studies have found 3 percent to 25 percent of children improve fully and no longer are diagnosed as having autism. However, they may continue to have other developmental and behavioral symptoms. The children who improve are likely to have good learning abilities and to have received behavioral therapy. The AAP advocates early screening at 18 and 24 months of age and early diagnosis so that effective interventions can be introduced and all children with autism and related disorders may reach their maximum potential.

2. Where does the AAP stand on whether vaccines can cause autism?

It is upsetting for families not to know what caused their child's autism. While it is likely that there are many environmental factors that influence the development of autism, very careful and repeated studies have shown that vaccines do not cause autism. We share the concern that additional research is needed to investigate genetic and environmental factors that may affect the developing brain.

3. Why does the AAP think that the number of children diagnosed with autism has increased?

There are many possible reasons. One important fact is that the way the diagnosis of autism is made was changed in 1994 to include children with typical intellectual abilities as well as those with more limited skills. Also, because there was mounting evidence that early, intensive behavioral treatment could make a difference for these children, the federal government changed their educational categories so that more categories of children with disabilities could get services for a diagnosis of autism. There was a major public education campaign to alert parents to the importance of identifying autism as early as possible. These campaigns have been highly successful with increasing numbers of children and families receiving appropriate support. Many doctors and educators believe that in addition to these changes, the actual number of autism cases (prevalence) is also on the rise. The AAP strongly supports ongoing studies funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Institutes of Health that are trying to get to the bottom of what factors in our modern environment may be responsible for this overall increase.