

Autism Myths and Misconceptions

- I. Myth: The appearance of autism is relatively new.
 - a. **Truth:** Autism was first described by scientist Leo Kranner in 1943, but the earliest description of a child now known to have had autism was written in 1799. Ongoing research and improvements in diagnosis have identified that the characteristics of autism exist on a continuum with varying degrees of severity, intensity, and frequency. 2014 CDC estimates suggest that 1 in 68 children in the United States have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

- II. Myth: Autism is a mental health disorder.
 - a. **Truth:** Autism is a neurological disorder. Studies of the people with autism have revealed abnormalities in brain structure and neurotransmitter levels. What is commonly overlooked is that individuals with developmental disabilities are **twice as likely to have a co-occurring mental health disorder** that also needs treatment or, at times, may render them in need of acute mental health stabilization, while also taking into consideration the developmental disability.

- III. Myth: All individuals with autism have mental disabilities.
 - a. **Truth:** Individuals on the autism spectrum are unique, with a wide range of intellectual abilities. Individuals with autism can be harder to test so IQ and abilities can be under- or over-estimated, unless testing is done by an expert in IDD and autism. Tests designed to include language and interpersonal analyses may misrepresent the intelligence of people with autism, **who struggle with social skills**. Many individuals on the autism spectrum have earned college and graduate degrees and work in a variety of professions. Conversely, it is sometimes mistakenly assumed that an individual with autism has a higher level of understanding than they do, based on their behavior, language skills or high-level of ability in a specific area.

- IV. Myth: Autism is caused by vaccines.
 - a. **Truth:** There is no evidence that childhood vaccination causes autism. A 1998 study linking autism with vaccines has since been retracted and numerous studies continue to confirm that there is no direct evidence that links vaccines to the development of autism.

- V. Myth: Autism is caused by poor parenting or "refrigerator mothers."

- a. **Truth:** In the 1950s, there was an assumption that autism was caused by emotionally distant or cold parents. Though the exact cause of autism has not been determined, it is now firmly established that the development of autism has nothing to do with parenting style.
- VI.** Myth: Autism is caused solely by environmental factors.
- a. **Truth:** Genes have been identified as one of the causes of autism. Parents whose first child has autism are more likely than the general population to have a second child with autism. Identical twin studies have shown that if one twin has autism, the other has a 90 percent chance of having autism as well. However, environmental factors can contribute to symptom severity for some individuals.
- VII.** Myth: Individuals with autism are violent.
- a. **Truth:** Though there have been recent news stories relating autism to violence, aggressive acts from autistic individuals usually arise from sensory overload or emotional distress, and it is unusual for individuals with autism to act violently out of malice or pose any danger to society. Many individuals actually prefer to limit their exposure and interactions with other people because social situations can feel confusing and anxiety-provoking.
- VIII.** Myth: All individuals with autism have savant abilities.
- a. **Truth:** While there is a higher prevalence of savant abilities among those with autism, only about 10 percent of individuals with autism exhibit savant abilities. Some individuals with autism have what are called “splinter skills,” meaning skills in one or two areas that are above their overall performance abilities.
- IX.** Myth: Individuals with autism do not feel love. Individuals with autism are unable or unwilling to form meaningful social relationships.
- a. **Truth:** Though many individuals with autism have difficulty with social interaction, they can have close social relationships, fall in love and even raise children. Some people may express their loving feelings in less obvious ways, but it does not mean they are incapable of experiencing or expressing love.
- X.** Myth: People with autism are cold and lack empathetic feelings.
- a. **Truth:** Individuals with autism feel as much, if not more, empathy as others, but they may express it in ways that are harder to recognize. Some individuals with autism may seem “cold or uncaring” if they are very anxious or if they are

expected to show care or empathy in a more “typical” way.

- XI.** Myth: People with autism can’t stand to be touched.
 - a. **Truth:** This can be true for some people who have high sensory sensitivities but many individuals with autism enjoy hugs, light massage, and other forms of touch.

- XII.** Myth: People with autism have no sense of humor.
 - a. **Truth:** This may be true for some people with autism, but it is more likely that the individual expresses or shares humor in unique or less obvious ways. Many parents report that their family member may tease, tell jokes, or mimic comedy actions or comedy lines appropriately, anticipating others will be entertained.

- XIII.** Myth: Autism can be cured.
 - a. **Truth:** There is currently no cure for autism spectrum disorders. However, early and intensive behavioral treatment can, in many cases, reduce the severity of symptoms and help individuals develop adaptive skills for daily living, emotion and behavior regulation, and social engagement.