

AUTISM for First Responders

10 Points First Responders Should Know About Autism

- 1) Autism is a developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. It is a neurological disorder that affects the development of the brain. Characteristics include communication impairments, social skills deficits, and restrictive interests/repetitive behaviors or interests.
- 2) Some individuals with autism are non-verbal or only repeat what is said to them. Instead of talking, they may communicate with sign language, picture cards, or gestures/pointing.
- 3) Those individuals with autism who are verbal may not have good receptive language – they may not understand what you are saying or the questions you are asking. Also, they may not be able to sustain a conversation or be able to successfully convey their thought, feelings, or experiences.
- 4) Individuals with autism may appear to be poor listeners – they may not seem to listen to what you say, make eye contact, or understand gestures, personal space, body language, or facial expressions.
- 5) Many young individuals with autism do not have a social awareness of others. They may be oblivious to other children, have no concept of the needs of others, or not notice another person's distress.
- 6) Some individuals with autism can be aggressive with others, or hurt themselves. These behaviors may be their way of communicating their needs to others. If these individuals are confronted by a First Responder they don't know, they may become aggressive. This is not because they want to hurt someone, but is a way of saying, "Leave me alone." They might hit themselves on the head repeatedly because they are scared or physically uncomfortable, not because they want to hurt themselves.

Continued...

- 7) It is possible that these children have never had contact with police, firefighters, or EMS workers. They may not recognize the vehicles or the uniforms. They may not understand who you are or what you do.
- 8) Many individuals with autism have sensory issues, such as sensitivities to loud noises or bright lights. The lights and sirens that may be fun for “typical” children may be very overwhelming for children with autism. They may cover their ears or eyes, throw tantrums, or run away.
- 9) Many individuals with autism 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 individual with autism, 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 begin understanding what you have said. Repeat or rephrase if you feel s/he did not understand you. The person may not understand gestures.

Avoid sarcasm and humorous statements; most people with autism will not understand them. And remember to be patient – people with autism really do want things to get better.

Facts about autism:

- occurs in one in every 88 births
- is more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined
- is more prevalent in boys than girls
- occurs in all races, ethnicities, and social groups
- is considered a “national public health crisis” by the CDC
- currently has no known cause or cure

Effective treatments are available for children, adolescents, and adults on the autism spectrum; early intervention services are critical to a child’s long-term success.

www.mayinstitute.org

May Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides educational, rehabilitative, and behavioral healthcare services to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities, brain injury, mental illness, and behavioral health needs. Since its founding more than 55 years ago, May Institute has evolved into an award-winning national network that serves thousands of individuals and their families every year at nearly 200 service locations across the country.

For more information, contact May Institute at 800-778-7601 or info@mayinstitute.org.