

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES



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A Brief (UK) History of the Understanding of Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition which impacts social communication and the ability to think flexibly; autistic people usually have some problems in processing sensory information and will have some restricted and repetitive behaviours. Autism occurs in varying levels of severity and is a lifelong condition; autistic children become autistic adults.

The exact cause of autism is unknown at the present time; it is thought to be a genetic condition as it tends to run in families. There are also thought to be environmental factors; many experts believe there is a wide range of elements that could lead to the development of autism. The characteristics of autism can occur as the result of a trauma to the brain, but more usually it is present from birth.

It was first described by Leo Kanner in the US in 1943 who studied children more severely affected by Autism. Kanner emphasised the impairment of their ability to interact with other people, saying they had a 'powerful desire for aloneness' and an 'obsessive interest on persistent sameness'. He named this condition 'early infantile autism'. At the same time Hans Asperger was studying children with a higher functioning form of Autism in Austria, who had higher IQ's than the children Kanner studied and more sociability; they were considered to have 'Asperger's Syndrome'.

Early research into Autism* found that there were three areas in which people were consistently challenged, known as the triad of impairments. These are *social understanding*, *difficulties around communication* and *rigidity of thought*.

There were early misunderstandings of the condition, including Bruno Bettelheim and others (including Kanner) in the 1950s who blamed distant 'refrigerator' mothers for their children's' behaviour. This was replaced in the 1960s by a behavioural understanding.

In the past, it was generally thought that a diagnosis of Autism meant that a child would have 'special' or savant skills, but in fact the likelihood of this is fewer than one in ten. An increasing understanding of Autism has led to a more positive outcome for children and young people with the condition. The importance of early intervention was recognised, and the value of structure and routine. Also, the use of visual cues (photographs, symbols etc.) to support learning and engagement.

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*Lorna Wing and Judith Gould's early work in the 1970s on the epidemiology of autism and related conditions, led to the concept of a spectrum of autistic conditions.

The 'Theory of Mind' (Simon Baron-Cohen) area of research studied the difficulty that people with Autism have in seeing things from another person's perspective and produced some useful ways of supporting this deficit. It also highlighted the vulnerability autistic individuals have around recognising deception and understanding the intentions of others.

In 1991, Carol Gray developed Social Stories™ which are a very effective way of helping people on the spectrum to understand social situations and change their perception or thinking in a specific area.

More recently there has been an increased understanding of the impact of sensory processing difficulties on individuals with Autism (and other neurodevelopmental conditions), and a growing array of strategies are emerging based on this understanding.

The Maori term for autism is 'Takiwatanga', which means 'in their own time and space'

The 2013 edition of the DSM diagnostic manual (DSM-5) removed the various terms used to describe the different presentations and understanding to give an overarching diagnosis of 'autism'. It added 3 'severity levels' to indicate the support required.

Physical aspects, including gastrointestinal concerns and reduced immune system regulation are the subject of ongoing research which may yield further understanding and possible approaches to helping autistic people.

With increased online accessibility a growing autistic community is developing; many autistic individuals have a strong presence on social media, which has enabled more self-advocacy, and representation by autistic people to promote greater understanding, expression and autonomy. The last decade has seen a greater understanding and awareness of the way autism presents in women and girls.

There have also been a number of investigations into the care of autistic people with greater emphasis and expectation on caring agencies to respect and value their choices, preferences and rights.