

## APRIL IS AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH, GET INVOLVED

April is recognised as Autism awareness month. Many of you might know of a disorder called autism but that's as far as it goes. For those who do not know, autism is a developmental disability that affects a person's ability to communicate, relate to others and interact with his or her surroundings.

Autism occurs one in every 500 births and is five times more likely to strike boys than girls. It is usually diagnosed when a child is between 15 and 36 months old, although signs of the disorder can show up earlier and can be difficult to identify since there's nothing abnormal about the physical appearance of a child with autism, and the fact that children develop at different rates. As it relates to the causes, no one knows exactly what triggers the disease. **SYMPTOMS OF AUTISM** Persons with autism may possess the following characteristics: · communication problems, which may include delays in developing speech, repeating words and speaking in a monotone that lacks pitch, inflection or rhythm; · Poor social interaction: withdrawing from physical contact with other people, have difficulty making eye contact and a lack of interest in other children and what other children are doing and having a preference to play by themselves. · Difficulty dealing with interruption of routine schedule and change. · Unusual behaviour such as spinning or flapping hands. · Throwing tantrums that are prolonged and begin with little warning. · Laughing or crying for no reason. · Very physically active or very underactive. · Unusual responses to many sensory experiences, especially to sudden, loud noises or high-pitched sounds. The identification of these behaviours on an isolated basis does not necessarily mean the child has autism. Usually it's a collection of these behaviour patterns that leads to a diagnosis of autism. It must be noted, too, that not every child with autism will have all of these behaviour types. **TREATMENT FOR AUTISM** · Applied behavioural analysis (ABA) is the oldest and most researched treatment specifically developed for autism. · Speech therapy · Occupational therapy · Social skills therapy · Physical therapy These are some programmes that provide educational and therapeutic services to a child living with autism. One of autism's deficits is a lack of social and communication skills; these programs are geared towards abating that as much as possible. **HELPING A CHILD WITH AUTISM** The autistic child requires much of the parents' attention. Therefore, parents should be educated in behavioural techniques so they can participate in all aspects of the child's care and treatment. Here are some of the ways the parents can interact with their autistic child and help them to develop to their greatest potential. · Try to show the child affection in as many ways as possible. Though some children with autism have trouble receiving and expressing affection, they can still benefit from nurturing from a parent. · Present information visually as well as verbally. Combine the spoken word with the presentation of photographs and pictures, sign language symbols or gestures to help the child make his or her needs, feelings or ideas known. · Become familiar with non-profit organisations that focus on autism, for example, Jamaica Autism Support Association (JASA). · Be patient with your children. Behaviour management with autistic children is a big problem for many families. Remember that your child isn't willfully misbehaving, just trying to make sense out of their surroundings. · Be consistent, have routines at home and when out. · Notice your child's cues to stop a misbehaviour before it occurs. A child might whine, or begin avoiding eye contact. The Jamaica Autism Support Association (JASA) was formed in 2007 by Maya Chung-smith, who is a parent of an autistic child. It was founded to provide united support and the sharing of useful information between parents of children assessed to be on the autism spectrum. So this month, get to know about autism and how you can get involved and support the JASA. For more information on autism, please go to [autisminfo.com](http://autisminfo.com) or [Jamaicaautism.org](http://Jamaicaautism.org).