

Autism

Autism, which affects thought, perception and attention, is not just one disorder with a well defined set of symptoms; autism is a broad spectrum of disorders that ranges from mild to severe. In addition, the behavior usually occurs across many different situations and is consistently inappropriate for the child's age.

For a child to be labeled as a child with Autism in the school setting, Autism must impact the child's ability to function within his or her educational setting. A child can have a medical diagnosis of Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder, and not meet the criteria for educational Autism set by the Wisconsin Department of Instruction (DPI). A child may instead meet the criteria as a child with Autism in the educational setting without a medical diagnosis. To be considered a child with educational Autism, the child must meet BOTH of the following criteria:

1. The child displays difficulties or differences or both in interacting with people and events. The child may be unable to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships with people. The child may see consistency in environmental events to the point of exhibiting rigidity in routines.
2. The child displays problems which extend beyond speech and language to other aspects of social communication, both receptively and expressively. The child's verbal language may be absent or, if present, lacks the usual communicative form which may involve deviance or delay or both. The child may have a speech or language disorder or both in addition to communication difficulties associated with autism.

The DPI also requires that at least ONE of the following criteria must be checked "Yes:"

1. The child exhibits delays, arrests, or regressions in motor, sensory, social or learning skills. The child may exhibit precocious or advanced skill development, while other skills may develop at normal or extremely depressed rates. The child may not follow developmental patterns in the acquisition of skills.
2. The child exhibits abnormalities in the thinking process and in generalizing. The child exhibits strengths in concrete thinking while difficulties are demonstrated in abstract thinking, awareness and judgment. Perseverant thinking and impaired ability to process symbolic information may be present.
3. The child exhibits unusual, inconsistent, repetitive or unconventional responses to sounds, sights, smells, tastes, touch or movement. The child may have a visual or hearing impairment or both in addition to sensory processing difficulties associated with autism.
4. The child displays marked distress over changes, insistence on following routines, and a persistent preoccupation with or attachment to objects. The child's capacity to use objects in

an age-appropriate or functional manner may be absent, arrested or delayed. The child may have difficulty displaying a range of interests or imaginative activities or both. The child may exhibit stereotyped body movements.

Social communication, or pragmatic language, involves three major communication skills:

- **Using language** for different purposes, such as
 - greeting (e.g., hello, goodbye)
 - informing (e.g., I'm going to get a cookie)
 - demanding (e.g., Give me a cookie)
 - promising (e.g., I'm going to get you a cookie)
 - requesting (e.g., I would like a cookie, please)

- **Changing language** according to the needs of a listener or situation, such as
 - talking differently to a baby than to an adult
 - giving background information to an unfamiliar listener
 - speaking differently in a classroom than on a playground

- **Following rules** for conversations and storytelling, such as
 - taking turns in conversation
 - introducing topics of conversation
 - staying on topic
 - rephrasing when misunderstood
 - how to use verbal and nonverbal signals
 - how close to stand to someone when speaking
 - how to use facial expressions and eye contact

These rules may vary across cultures and within cultures. It is important to understand the rules of your communication partner.

An individual with pragmatic problems may:

- say inappropriate or unrelated things during conversations
- tell stories in a disorganized way
- have little variety in language use

It is not unusual for children to have pragmatic problems in only a few situations. However, if problems in social language use occur often and seem inappropriate considering the child's age, a pragmatic disorder may exist. Pragmatic disorders often coexist with other language problems such as vocabulary development or grammar. Pragmatic problems can lower social acceptance. Peers may avoid having conversations with an individual with a pragmatic disorder.

Pragmatic Language Tips

Parents, caregivers, families, and teachers can help individuals use language appropriately in social situations (*pragmatics*). Some general suggestions to help develop skills in three major pragmatic areas are listed below.

Using Language for Different Purposes

- **Ask questions** or make suggestions to use language for different purposes:

Desired Language Function	Suggested Question or Comment
Comment	"What happened?" "Tell me about..."
Request	"Tell your friend..." "What do you want?"
Question	"Ask me"

- **Respond to the intended message** rather than correcting the pronunciation or grammar. Be sure to provide an appropriate model in your own speech. For example, if an individual says, "That's how it doesn't go," respond, "You're right. That's not how it goes."
- **Take advantage of naturally occurring situations.** For example, practice greetings at the beginning of a day, have the individual ask peers what they want to eat for dinner, or request necessary materials to complete a project.

Autism Facts: http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm

Welcome to the Autism Support Network – Connect with Others <http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com>

To contact a speech-language pathologist, contact your child's school, Pulaski Community School District's Student Services office (920-822-6020) or visit [ASHA's Find a Professional](#).