

# Five myths about autism/ASD

By Lynnette Henderson

Myths have fascinated humans for centuries. Harmful myths about people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) interfere with our positive interactions with them. Here are a few myths you may have heard about people with ASD and the evidence-based truths.

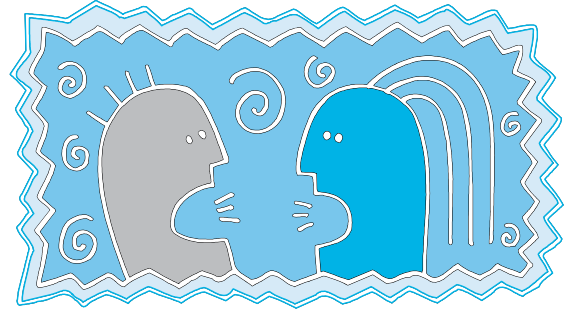
## 1. “Autism is a choice”

Communication is a key area of impairment in autism; the ‘right’ thing to say or do may not come naturally a person with ASD. Difficulties with social interaction are not due to orneriness, rudeness, self-centeredness, or a lack of caring for others. But family members and Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) can sometimes feel hurt or frustrated as a common response. During these times, it may be helpful to consider how this is the person’s best effort at saying or doing the ‘right’ thing in that moment. Remember that the person’s challenges stem from biological differences in the brain and he or she may have difficulty expressing feelings in a typical way.

## 2. “People with ASD can’t make eye contact”

Difficulty with natural eye contact may be one of the first signs of challenges with social communication. Eye contact may or may not come naturally to a person with ASD. It might be uncomfortable or anxiety producing. Some people with ASD may sneak peeks at your eyes or face. Others might stare. Some may follow ‘rules for required eye contact’. It may be

challenging for a person to listen and understand what you are saying while making eye contact at the same time. Eye contact varies widely based on the person and his or her preferences and experiences.



## 3. “People with ASD just want to be left alone”

There are introverts and extroverts with and without autism. As an introvert, one may find time with people tiring and need to be alone to recharge. As an extrovert, one may find people energizing and being alone draining. Differences in social interest are only part of the picture. Friendships also require social skills. A person with ASD may want to interact with others but may not understand how. Being alone may be a person’s easy or default setting. Remember that people with ASD can and do form loving relationships with family members, friends, and significant others.

## 4. “Vaccines or immunizations cause ASD”

There is a lot of controversy around what causes autism. Millions of dollars and hours have been spent researching and disproving links between vaccines and the specific ingredient thimerosal (removed from vaccines in 2001). There is no scientific evidence that vaccines or immunizations cause autism. But some parents may strongly feel differently. Their child may have

been vaccinated at the same time as when they began to notice developmental differences. As a DSP it is important know what the research says, but to also be sensitive to different beliefs around what causes autism. For more information, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/Concerns/Autism/Index.html>.

## 5. “Every person with ASD is a genius and has a special talent like the movie character Rainman”

People with all levels of intellectual ability can have ASD. That means there are genius-level people with ASD. There are also people with ASD who have intellectual disabilities. The special or ‘savant’ skills that *Rainman* showed are a natural outgrowth of his deep interests and autism-specific differences in brain organization. Your brain would also become highly specialized if you spent hours every day thinking about any one thing.

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