

► Autism is one of a group of developmental disorders that are characterized by severe behavioral abnormalities across the following primary areas of functioning: social development, communication, and behavior. While it is a complex syndrome that is not currently well understood, autism seems to affect the processing of information in the brain by somehow disrupting the organization of the nervous system and the connections within it. In addition, there appears to be a genetic component to autism. However, it is not clear whether the causes of autism are gene mutations or highly unusual combinations of typical genetic variants. What is clear is that autistic sufferers perceive and react to normal stimuli in ways that are not thought of as typical by most of society.

► The uncertain origins of autism often lead to controversy regarding its diagnosis. Part of the problem with diagnosing autism is that many of its defining traits commonly occur in the general population. For example, autistic toddlers, ages one to three, tend to make less eye contact and show lower ability to express themselves nonverbally than other young children of the same age. However, two- to three-year olds that have been raised in a highly stressful environment often display similar symptoms, making it difficult to attribute the behavior to a definite cause. In addition, older children and young adults demonstrate behaviors similar to responses connected with other disorders, such as anxiety disorders. Consequently, medical experts look for a broad range of symptoms that typically overlap the three areas of social development, communication, and behavior. When diagnosing autism, medical experts typically observe impaired social function, which manifests itself by a deficiency in social intuition. Autistics tend to smile less often, show decreased instances of eye contact, and respond less often when their own names are called. In addition, they demonstrate lower levels of social bonding, although they are likely to become very attached to their primary caretakers. This lack of social connection means they face challenges in terms of making and maintaining friendships, which can result in higher levels of loneliness for them than their non-autistic peers.

► An inability to develop sufficient natural speech to communicate at a level that meets their needs is another common symptom of the disorder. This symptom can often present itself in the first year of an infant's life, and is characterized by lower levels of common infant sounds, known as babbling, as well as unusual body language and reduced response to speech and movement directed at the autistic infant. The lack of communication skills may intensify as the child approaches the second and third year of life, displaying itself in lower levels of consonant, and word formation, along with less integration of words and corresponding movements. At this stage, many sufferers of autism may simply repeat the words they hear, a condition called echolalia, rather than spontaneously forming responses to speech directed at or around them.

► Another hallmark of the condition is that autistic toddlers tend to engage in repetitive behavior that may be limited in scope. These behaviors can become ritualistic or compulsive in nature, meaning that the sufferer has to follow certain patterns of behavior in a certain arrangement, in order to maintain a sense of comfort and security in his environment. This tendency to repeat behaviors is often linked to a resistance to change, whether it is of schedules, immediate surroundings, or even objects within particular surroundings. In about 30 percent of autistic cases, certain behaviors can cause injury to the autistic or those around him, such as striking out or banging parts of his body against other objects.

► In some cases, autistic children appear to develop normally in their first year, and then regress, though this is not common. Regardless of how the initial stage starts, once it begins, autism progresses consistently throughout childhood without remission. Obvious signs gradually show themselves in the first year of a child's life and become rooted between the second and third years; the disorder persists throughout adulthood, though it may present in a less obvious manner.

Some words, such as *beneficial* and *violent* have positive or negative meanings associated with them. Understanding whether a word is positive, negative, or neutral in meaning can help you eliminate incorrect answer choices. Become familiar with Coxehead's Academic Word List (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/>). It will help you understand the TOEFL iBT® test passages better, and more specifically, help you to answer the vocabulary questions.

9. The word "component" in paragraph 1 is closest in meaning to  
 (A) element  
 (B) arrangement  
 (C) ornament  
 (D) disease

10. The word "controversy" in paragraph 2 is closest in meaning to  
 (A) discussion  
 (B) research  
 (C) agreement  
 (D) debate

11. The word "attribute" in paragraph 2 is closest in meaning to  
 (A) pull  
 (B) attach  
 (C) take  
 (D) commend

12. The word "primary" in paragraph 2 could best be replaced by  
 (A) elementary  
 (B) main  
 (C) introductory  
 (D) primitive

13. The word "sufficient" in paragraph 3 is closest in meaning to  
 (A) important  
 (B) abundant  
 (C) enough  
 (D) successive

14. The word "spontaneously" in paragraph 3 is closest in meaning to  
 (A) intentionally  
 (B) naturally  
 (C) irregularly  
 (D) repeatedly

15. The phrase "engage in" in paragraph 4 could best be replaced by  
 (A) protest  
 (B) start  
 (C) use  
 (D) determine

16. The word "persists" in paragraph 5 is closest in meaning to  
 (A) lessens  
 (B) worsens  
 (C) stops  
 (D) continues