

Aspect Autism Advisor Program

What is autism?



Autism is a condition that affects how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others, and experiences their environment. It is estimated that 1 in 70 people in Australia are on the autism spectrum. It starts when a person is born and stays with them into old age, however autism may not be evident in babies and toddlers until the demands of the environment and/or the child's skill levels may present differently. Every Autistic person is different. This is why autism is described as a 'spectrum'.

Autism has no known cause and cannot be identified through pre-natal testing, although continuing research indicates both genetic and environmental factors play a role. Autism is not caused by a person's up-bringing, social background or through anything that a parent may or may not have done.

There are lots of myths and misunderstandings about autism, and while many Autistic people experience difficulties, with the right support, they can achieve a great quality of life.

There is a misconception that the autism spectrum is linear. In fact, Autistic people can display a wide range of characteristics in their strengths, communication, social interactions, leisure and play - which can appear more like a constellation.



Encouraging communication

Here are some examples of how autism may present in an individual:

Strengths and Interests

- Areas of strength vary but include: logical or visual thinking, persistence, eye for detail, good skills with technology, memory for facts and figures
- Very strong focus on specific interest areas
- Deep interest in typical topics such as Pokémon, sport, Disney or trains or more unusual topics such as air conditioners or bins
- Up to 20% of Autistic people have exceptional or above average skills in one or more areas such as reading, maths, art, mechanics, music, memory

Communication

- Communicate honestly and directly
- Preference for factual discussion rather than small-talk, or use of sarcasm.
- Repeating word or phrases in a way that can seem out of context
- Preference for verbal description rather than use of gestures like pointing
- Using sounds, signs, gestures or pictures to communicate instead of spoken words
- Taking extra time to understand spoken information

Social Interactions

- Preference for quiet and calm social situations rather than busy complex social situations
- Might prefer to play alone or next to others more than with them
- An ability to pay attention without making eye contact
- Using or responding to body language differently
- Different interpretation of social interactions

Leisure and Play

- Preference for leisure based on passions
- Non-traditional play such as repetitive lining up of toys
- Preferring to do things in the same way and possible challenges coping with changes
- Comfortable socialising through technology such as phones, video conferencing or online chats and games

Sensory

- Being constantly aware or more aware of some sensations (sound, smells, tastes, touch, body position and own body internal sensations)
- Feeling distressed or overwhelmed if there are too many sensations at once (e.g. loud noises, strong smells, bright lights)
- Working hard to avoid distress by making their own adaptations to the environment e.g. covering their ears, removing themselves from noisy or bright environments

- Preference for soft materials in clothes, removal of tags
- Seeking sensory experiences for example smelling food, flicking fingers in front of lights
- Not noticing internal sensations like hunger or pain

Thinking

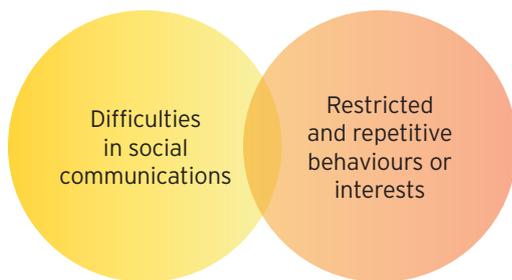
- An uneven pattern of thinking abilities
- An ability to focus on one thing for a very long time
- Preference not to switching from one thing to another
- An ability to notice specific details, patterns or changes that other people may not be aware of

Experiencing and displaying emotions

- A strong, sometimes overwhelming, emotional connection to others
- Repeating movements such as flapping hands or pacing around to show excitement or to help cope with stress
- Takes time to understand and regulate emotions
- A focus on own perspective in social situations

How is it Diagnosed?

In Australia, most people are diagnosed by a Paediatrician, Psychologist or a multi-disciplinary team. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V (DSM V May 2013) is the formal diagnostic criteria used to guide a diagnosis of autism. It is based on two main criteria:



To receive a diagnosis, a person must meet both of these criteria, which must both have been present since early childhood and limiting and impairing everyday functioning. A diagnosis will also include a severity rating, ranging from level 1 (requiring support) to level 3 (requiring very substantial support). Autism is usually diagnosed in early childhood, but can occur at any age.

There may be government funded assessment services available in your area. Your GP, health nurse or paediatrician can provide more information about diagnostic services in your local area.

Government funded assessment/ diagnostic services for ACT and NSW:

NSW

- The Children's Hospital Westmead - The Child Development Unit
- Sydney Children's Hospital Randwick - Tumbatin Clinic
- Royal North Shore Hospital - Child Development Service
- Wyong Hospital's Paediatric Assessment Unit
- Central Coast Local Health District
- Campbelltown Hospital Child Assessment Team
- Nepean Child Development Clinic
- Orange, Bathurst and Dubbo Health Service Paediatric Services
- Illawarra Shoalhaven Diagnostic and Assessment Service
- Sydney Local Health District

ACT

The Child Development Service - free autism assessments for children aged 0-12 who are ACT residents. A referral from a Paediatrician or Psychiatrist is required.

State based autism associations may also provide assessment services can provide information about local clinics and services. You can find your state autism association on the Raising Children Network website: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-services/services/asd-associations>

NDIS approved private assessment providers in your state via theNDIS website. Or on this link: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/participants/working-providers/find-registered-provider#provider-lists>

Medicare rebates: available to assist with the cost of seeking a diagnosis. Please discuss with your treating doctor or paediatrician for more information.

