

Parent Guide



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What is this resource and how do I use it?

If you think your child might be Autistic, this guide can help you to find out about what Autism is and the signs to look out for. It also includes information about getting a diagnosis and ways you can support your child to cope with everyday life.

What is the focus of this resource?

Signs of Autism

Empowering Parents of
Children with SEND

Strategies to Support

Further Ideas and Suggestions

We have lots of great resources in **this category** at the **Parents Hub**. Why not try using some of our ideas for **games** and **activities** to develop your child's working memory? Find out about other conditions such as **epilepsy**, **spina bifida** and **diabetes** with our fabulous **parent guides**.

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Supporting an Autistic Child:

A Guide for Parents



Supporting an Autistic Child: A Guide for Parents

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a lifelong spectrum of developmental conditions that affect how people communicate and experience the world around them. It is not an illness to be cured; instead it means that your brain works in a different way to other people.

Signs

Autistic people may share some characteristics and they might have strengths and weaknesses in different areas. Common signs include:

difficulty understanding how others think and feel

difficulty making friends and socialising

difficulty expressing their own feelings

anxiety over changes to routines

over- or under-sensitivity to sensory information, such as smells, sounds and sights, which can lead to great anxiety

a need for rituals or repetitive behaviours

frequent repetition of words and phrases

anxiety over unfamiliar situations or social events

taking things literally

stimming: self-stimulatory behaviours such as repetition of words and sounds, rocking, spinning, jumping, hand movements, rubbing skin and chewing

difficulty listening, concentrating and understanding

delayed or absent speech

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If you have a young child, you might also notice some of these:

They might not respond to their name.

They may avoid direct eye contact.

When you smile at them, they don't smile back.

They become very upset at disliking tastes, smells or sounds.

They repeat the same phrases.

They don't talk as much as other children of a similar age.

They don't understand jokes.

They make repetitive movements, such as flapping their hands or rocking their body.

If you have an older child, you might notice:

They have a very keen interest in a certain subject or activity.

They happily spend time alone because they find it hard to make friends.

They have a very literal understanding of language.

They may get very upset when asked to do something unexpected.

They like a regular daily routine and become anxious when the normality is disrupted.

They might need people to play by their rules in a game and get very upset if others don't follow the rules.

They find it hard to relate to children their own age and therefore prefer playing with younger children or adults.

They have difficulty adjusting their behaviour to different social contexts.

They find it hard to follow simple instructions.

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Girls and Boys



There is usually a difference in the way Autism looks in girls and boys. Girls are often better at 'masking' or hiding aspects of their Autism than boys are. They may appear to cope better in social situations and hide their feelings. Because of their more subtle presentation of Autism, it can be very difficult to diagnose and therefore their needs may not be addressed as quickly.

What causes Autism?



It is unknown what causes Autism. It is thought to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors affecting brain development and function. Traits can often be seen in family members, so it is thought that it can be passed down genetically.

Autism is not caused by bad parenting. It is not caused by vaccines or a poor diet. You can't 'catch' Autism as it is not an infection.



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Diagnosis

A diagnosis of Autism means that support can be put into place to effectively help your child cope with everyday demands to live a full and happy life.

Your child might display some of the signs of Autism from an early age; some other children do not display signs until later on.

If you feel that your child may be Autistic, keep notes of the signs that you see and when you see them. It will be important to talk to your child's school or childcare setting so that they can observe too. Talk to your child's teacher and **SENDCo** (special educational needs and disabilities coordinator) - they might complete some more formal observations of your child.

Your GP can refer your child for an Autism assessment. While you're waiting for the assessment, talk to your child's school about what support can be put into place to help them.

The Autism assessment team might comprise a **paediatrician**, **educational psychologist**, **speech and language therapist** and a **CAMHS team** (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).

Professionals will complete a range of activities in order to make a diagnosis. These include:

talking to you about any family history of ASC and your child's developmental milestones

observing you and your child interacting

observing your child playing

looking at reports from your child's school or nursery setting and doctor

asking about your child's medical history

completing a physical examination of your child

visiting your child at school to observe them within the setting, in class and at breaktime

You will get a written report of the outcome. This might be hard to understand as it might use terms that healthcare professionals use. Don't be afraid to ask exactly what it means and what support will be put in place.

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The Next Steps



There is no cure for Autism. It is something you are born with and will have for your whole life.

If your child is diagnosed as Autistic, you'll need to find out what support is offered in your local area. You can do this by looking up your council's 'Local Offer', which sets out what they can do for you.

If your child's school has not already started the process, talk to them about an EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan). This is a document that describes your child's needs and sets out the support that can be expected for your child to make progress academically, socially and emotionally.

You will be able to discuss your child's difficulties with school staff and other involved professionals, who will make suggestions for how to best support your child so that they are able to thrive.

What can I do to support my child?

Depending on your child's individual Autistic traits, there are lots of things that can help your child.

Reduce the Unknown

Many Autistic children like routine: not knowing what is going to happen next or at a particular point during the day can be daunting, as can visits to unfamiliar places or new people. As far as possible, you can help your child to overcome some of their anxiety by talking them through their day. If there's a visit to a doctor on the cards, talk about how you'll get there, what the waiting room is like, how you'll book in and what the doctor might ask or do. Use **visual timetables** and **'Now and Next' boards** to help your child to see what their day looks like and deal with transitions between activities.



What can I do to support my child?

Model Clear Communication



If your child is having difficulties with communication, make sure you model to them what good communication looks like. To get their attention, say their name. Speak slowly and clearly so that your child understands what you have said. Use language they know. If your child is finding it hard to communicate, you could use some sort of **visual clue** to help. **Visual support cards** can be used to help manage behaviour too. These types of visual clues can also help them to communicate with others. Give them time to process what has been said rather than expect an answer or an action straight away.

Celebrate Every Success

It's easy to concentrate on negative traits when you have an Autistic child. But look at what is in front of you - your child will do things every day that are great and show progress for them. Celebrate those small things that other parents might take for granted. Your celebration acts as an encouragement to your child to keep going and will motivate them to recognise their own successes.

Educate Yourself and Others

You'll want to read up as much as you can about Autism and how it can present in different ways for different people - this is a natural reaction. However, despite so much media attention on Autism in recent years, many people still do not really know what it is. Most people will not have the understanding or experience that you have. You may come across individuals who wrongly believe that your child is just being awkward deliberately or that they need telling off if they have an extreme reaction to something. Don't accept that these individuals are just poorly educated in Autism; if you are able to, explain the difficulties your child has so that they understand a little more.

Make sure that any adults coming into contact with your child know that they are Autistic. Giving them some information about your child's needs will help that person to support your child and give your child a better overall experience.

What can I do to support my child?

Communicate with School



It's important that you develop a close working relationship with your child's educational setting. You'll want to let them know things that work for your child at home and tell them things that your child needs support with. Ensuring this **communication** is clear and supportive is important: it will help to provide consistency in the support your child receives. **Short written notes between home and school** can help you both to see how your child has been and to pre-empt any hurdles they might come across.

If you have any questions about the **support your child receives at school**, or you think that the support needs tweaking, speak to school staff. You know your child best and their teacher will be open to different approaches to give them the best experience.

Be Prepared to Have Boundaries

Make sure you set boundaries for your child so that they understand what is acceptable and what is not. Those boundaries need to be consistent so that your child understands your expectations. Your child is likely to thrive on having boundaries in place because otherwise they may feel out of control and overwhelmed.

Be Flexible

Life might look a little different from how it did before - and that's not a bad thing; it just requires a degree of flexibility. Special days - such as birthdays, **Halloween**, **Bonfire Night** and **Christmastime** - might need to be adjusted in order for your child to feel comfortable and that's fine.

If you're taking your child along to a party, for example, your own expectations about arriving at a certain time, playing rowdy games, dancing and eating food together might not work with your Autistic child. You might find that arriving at the start of a party is too overwhelming for them and you might suggest arriving slightly later. Similarly, with party games and dancing, you might realise your child finds these uncomfortable due to loud noises and lights. That's okay - have a chat to the party organiser to see if there's a quiet place your child can retreat to. If your child uses noise-reducing headphones, they might like to take them along. Eating unfamiliar foods with lots of noisy children might be very challenging, so could you bring along a few foods you know they'll enjoy? Just because your child's experience of the party is different, it doesn't mean they'll enjoy it any less.



What can I do to support my child?

Show Respect



Your child's difficulties might seem insignificant to you. You might even think of them as 'silly'. They're not. They are extremely important to your child and they can't just 'get over' them. Autistic children require respect for their needs and wishes and an understanding that their brain works in a different way. You're not there to judge their actions and reactions to things; you're there to support them to live their best life.

Find Patterns in Their Behaviour

You might find that your child reacts in a certain way to a particular social situation. You might see that they find their birthday overwhelming and need extra support. Observe carefully to see if there are any patterns so that you can start to plan for any difficulties they may have.

You might find at times that your child's responses to certain situations might be displayed as emotional dysregulation, which can result in a meltdown or a shutdown. Use our **parent guide** to understand more about these, what they look like and how you can support your child.

Be an Advocate for Inclusion

If you're ever told that your child can't participate in something because they'll find it hard, challenge the decision. Your child should never be excluded from taking part in an activity because of their Autism. Extra support might need to be put into place for them to take part, or a risk assessment completed to work out ways to keep them safe. Your child has just as much right to participate in activities as other children.

Love and Accept Them

Ensure you show your child that you love them and tell them often - even if they might not reciprocate. Your child does not need to be changed - this isn't the intention of a diagnosis. They just need some support to overcome challenges. You can help them do this.



What can I do to support my child?

Seek Support



There are so many places that offer amazing support to parents of Autistic children. Join support groups, sign up for regular newsletters and take up offers of help. Many people will have similar experiences and knowing that others have been through it will help you to feel that you're not alone.

Nourish Yourself

Caring for an Autistic child can be an absolute joy. It can also be an all-consuming job, where nothing is easy and everything feels like a fight. It's easy to let it overtake your life and lose your identity, but it's important not to let this happen. Make time for you. Do things that help you relax or let you think about something else: it might be a sport, a hobby or simply getting together with friends to have a drink and put the world to rights. You might need to plan these opportunities in advance, but once they're in the diary, protect that time.

Sometimes it's hard to see the good in what you're doing. It can feel like you're doing and saying the same thing day in, day out and it can feel joyless at times. Every day, try to think of something positive that has happened and then do something you love. A cup of tea alone in the garden, a warm bubble bath or giving yourself permission for an afternoon nap can help place emphasis on your own needs and recognise that what you're doing is amazing.



Disclaimer: We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. These resources are those which we have generally found to be of benefit to learners on the Autism Spectrum. We have consulted with our partners in producing these resources, to ensure they are representative of the #actuallyAutistic community. However, every child's needs are different and so these resources may not be suitable for your child. It is for you to consider whether it is appropriate to use these resources with your child; you will find editable alternatives on all of our Autism specific resources to enable you to edit and amend them for individual needs and preferences. Twinkl is an international company and therefore some resources may feature terminology that is appropriate in some countries but not others - in such cases, you are able to request an alternative version specific to the UK's inclusive approach.