

Autism spectrum disorders

This is a developmental disorder. There is the presence of markedly abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication and they have a restricted range of activities and interests. People on the autistic spectrum can vary markedly from each other and their presentation depends on their developmental stage and age.

Signs to look out for:

Poor non-verbal communication including:

- Limited eye contact/too intense
- Difficulty reading body language/facial expressions
- Struggle to get personal space right
- Want to play by their rules and no one else's, or to play on their own
- Do not like group activities
- Lack of social or emotional reciprocity
- Prefer friendships with older/younger children
- Impaired ability to initiate or sustain conversation unless about topic of interest
- Repetitive or unusual use of language
- Lack of varied or spontaneous make believe play
- Intense preoccupation with a topic/subject
- Inflexible adherence to routines or rituals
- Repetitive motor mannerisms – flapping their arms or twisting or bouncing
- Preoccupation with parts of objects or shiny objects
- Sensitive to certain noises; voices may seem too loud
- May notice noises others do not
- Hands over ears eg to fire works/ hand dryers/ hate chewing of peers at lunch
- Smells lead to gagging/nausea
- Tell people they smell
- Want to smell things
- Sudden odours lead to fight/flight response
- Refuses to change from shorts/trousers
- Simple touch perceived as a threat
- Hates feel of water/hair being brushed
- Needs washing labels out of clothes
- Hates feel of hand on paper when writing

If you suspect a young person may be on the autistic spectrum you could ask the parents to complete the CAST or the ASSQ and advise them to take this to their GP to consider referral for assessment.

Why is a diagnosis of an autistic spectrum disorder helpful?

- It stops the parents from doubting their own abilities at parenting; they will begin to understand why things that work for most children do not work for their child and it stops guilt and blame and a sense of failure.
- It helps people understand that the child is differently abled and the child will benefit from people knowing how to assist them to learn and cope with the world when their nervous system processes information slightly differently
- Parents can develop constructive relationships with school, voluntary services and healthcare services to help the child or young person
- It helps the child or young person understand why they feel different and helps them understand themselves and that there are other young people they can identify with
- It allows a language to be used between professionals to understand the child's needs and how to help them
- A diagnosis opens many doors for advice and support
- The child may be entitled to apply for an EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan)
- Adaptations can be made to the child's environment to help make the world a less distressing and confusing place
- It will help everyone learn which parts of the child's behaviour is normal pushing of boundaries and which is due to their autistic traits so parents and teacher's can learn to manage all aspects appropriately