

## How is autism treated?

Autism is a lifelong condition, but there are supports that help children build skills that are important for quality of life. The younger the child is when they begin receiving support, the more they can benefit from it. Common supports include:

- **Applied behavior analysis (ABA)** is an intensive teaching approach that uses a child's interests and things in their environment to help them build skills, which are broken down into small steps. ABA can improve a child's language, communication, cognition, play, social, behavior, and self-help skills.
- **Speech and language therapy (SLT)** supports communication and language development in children.
- **Occupational therapy (OT)** supports the fine motor skills a child needs to perform daily activities, such as dressing, buttoning, using utensils, or writing. It can also help sensory-motor development.
- **Social skills groups** help children learn and use social behaviors.
- **Parent training** teaches parents specialized techniques to support their child's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in day-to-day life.
- **Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT)** helps older, verbal children learn to manage negative emotions and develop tools to respond to difficult situations.

## Is there medication for autism?

There is no medicine for autism, but there are medications that can help with related challenges such as inattention, aggression, depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, and trouble sleeping.

## What is neurodiversity?

Kids with autism are called neurodiverse (or neurodivergent) because their brains respond to the world in unusual ways that can be difficult for others to understand. These differences result in both strengths and challenges, which can be mild or severe.



For more resources on autism in English and Spanish, visit the Child Mind Institute's Family Resource Center at [childmind.org/resources](https://childmind.org/resources)

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. We've become the leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health by providing gold-standard evidence-based care, delivering educational resources to millions of families each year, training educators in underserved communities, and developing tomorrow's breakthrough treatments.

### Clinical Care at the Child Mind Institute: In Person and Telehealth

To learn more about our services and request an appointment call (877) 203-3452 or email [appointments@childmind.org](mailto:appointments@childmind.org).

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# Autism in Kids: Quick Facts

Symptoms of autism spectrum disorder  
and tips for supporting autistic children  
and teenagers



## What is autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disorder that affects children in two big ways. First, it can make it harder for kids to communicate and socialize with others. Second, it can cause them to have repetitive behaviors and unusual or narrow interests. It's called a spectrum because children with autism have a wide range of symptoms, and some are impaired much more than others. Kids on the spectrum range from bright, highly verbal children who are minimally affected to nonverbal, cognitively impaired children.

## What are signs that a child is autistic?

Symptoms of autism in children often appear before the age of two, but for some, signs may not become clear until they start school, or even later. Not every child shows every symptom, and needs for support vary widely.



Signs of autism can include:

### Social Communication

- Does not use at least two gestures to communicate by 9 months or 15–16 gestures by 18 months
- Inconsistently makes eye contact with others
- Appears content on their own between 6–18 months; is self-entertained by objects or watching something in the environment
- May dislike close physical contact (e.g., hugs, cuddles) when it's initiated by a parent
- Does not regularly show or give objects to others without prompting
- In social settings, seems to focus attention more on objects than people
- Seems more naive than other children their age, has difficulty reading social cues
- Has trouble talking about their experiences and emotions
- Speaks in a flat or singsong voice
- Has trouble listening and responding in conversation
- May seem anxious or shy in social settings

### Repetitive Behaviors and Restricted Interests

- Lines up or arranges toys instead of playing with them
- Intense attention to small details
- Highly specific interests, like numbers, letters, animals, airplanes, or transit systems
- Strong interests in unusual things such as ceiling fans, spoons, water
- Reacts negatively to small changes in their routine
- Moves their body or hands in repetitive ways when excited
- Looks at toys or objects very closely
- May have a strong memory and recall for facts on specific topics

## Sensory Issues

Children with autism are often more sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or smells than typically developing children. For example, loud noises or bright lights may make them uncomfortable. They may become overwhelmed in environments with a lot of competing noises, like crowds, classrooms, or birthday parties. They may be very picky about the texture of foods they will eat or clothing they will wear. Others may need more sensations to feel comfortable, so they seek out physical stimulation by spinning, jumping up and down, or pressing their body into people or objects.

## How is autism diagnosed?

A primary care doctor can complete a preliminary assessment using a screening test or parent questionnaire. If a screener indicates signs of autism, your child should be referred to a specialized professional for further evaluation. To be diagnosed with autism, a child must show both social-communication challenges and repetitive behaviors, and they must interfere with the child's daily life.

## When can autism be diagnosed?

Autism can be diagnosed by age 3 in most children and as young as 12 months for some. Experts recommend getting a diagnosis as early as possible so kids can begin receiving support to help them develop skills that they are not naturally acquiring.