

Why should I get my child diagnosed?

A diagnosis of autism can be the first step in understanding why a child is not achieving developmental milestones or is displaying unusual interests or behaviours. A diagnosis can provide parents or carers with opportunities to introduce management plans that can help their child with communication skills, social interactions and behaviours. In addition, diagnosis can offer access to support at school or special needs schooling, and government funding and services.

Current research has shown that the earlier a child starts interventions the better the developmental outcomes can be. As an example, professional involvement from a speech pathologist can considerably improve a child's language and behavioural development.

What does the research tell us?

- Researchers now suggest that a reliable diagnosis of autism can be made in children younger than two years of age.¹
- When a reliable diagnosis is made during the preschool years, the evidence suggests that there is a greater likelihood of an improved developmental path.² This includes benefits in language and intellectual development. Children's developmental outcomes are likely to be better when interventions start at a younger age because the child has greater opportunities to gain from the plasticity and flexibility of the very young brain.³
- The Aspect Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP) provides children from birth to six years of age who show signs of developmental delay with individualised intervention plans prior to formal autism diagnosis. This program uses a team approach, including speech pathologists, occupational therapists and special education teachers who work together with the family to support the child's development. Evaluation of this program shows that specialised team support is effective in preparing families for formal diagnosis and in developing parent's confidence in discussing their child's needs with professionals.
- Community screening programs run by public health services can be a valuable resource for parents who wish to discuss their concerns about their child's developmental progress. These programs can provide an early opportunity for children who show signs of developmental delay to be referred for further clinical assessment.⁴

- Parent education and practical behaviour management support is important in improving AUTISM symptoms. When parents understand an AUTISM diagnosis and receive training in behaviour management, children can show an improvement in their AUTISM symptoms.⁵

Symptoms of autism in children

No single indicator necessarily signals autism – usually, a child will present with several indicators from some of the following categories:

Behaviour

- Has inexplicable tantrums
- Has unusual interests or attachments
- Has unusual motor movements such as flapping hands or spinning
- Has extreme difficulty coping with change

Sensory

- Afraid of some everyday sounds
- Uses peripheral vision to look at objects
- Fascination with moving objects
- High tolerance of temperature and pain

Communication

- Not responding to his/her name by 12 months
- Not pointing or waving by 12 months
- Loss of words previously used
- Speech absent at 18 months
- No spontaneous phrases by 24 months
- Selective hearing – responding to certain sounds but ignoring the human voice
- Unusual language patterns (e.g. repetitive speech)

Social skills

- Looks away when you speak to him/her
- Does not return your smile
- Lack of interest in other children
- Often seems to be in his/her own world
- Does not seek to share interests with others

Play

- Prefers to play alone
- Very limited social play (e.g. “Peek-a-boo”)
- Play is limited to certain toys
- Plays with objects in unusual ways such as repetitive spinning or lining up
- Shows very strong interest in or attachment to a limited number of games or toys

March 2017

Diagnosis

Autism is diagnosed by developmental paediatricians, psychiatrists and psychologists who are qualified and experienced in assessing people on the autism spectrum. An assessment includes observations, standardised tests or questionnaires, and meeting with the individual, their family and service providers. Information is gathered about the individual's strengths and difficulties, particularly in the areas of social interaction and social communication, sensory processing, and restricted and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours. There is no single behaviour that indicates autism. Currently, there are no blood tests that can detect autism.

In Australia, as in the UK and USA, professional diagnosis commonly uses the classification provided by the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5), produced by the American Psychiatric Association. Under the most recent version (DSM 5) there is now a single diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, with a severity ranking of 1, 2 or 3 allocated according to individual's support needs. An alternative diagnostic tool used for the clinical identification and classification of autism is the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), produced by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The most recent version (ICD-10) provides four separate classifications for Autistic Disorder, Asperger's syndrome, Other pervasive developmental disorders; and Pervasive developmental disorder, unspecified.

Autism is usually diagnosed in early childhood, but can be done at any age.

If you would like an assessment for autism, your GP can refer you to a developmental paediatrician or diagnostic assessment service in your area. Aspect provides specialist autism assessment and diagnostic services in New South Wales.

What support is available for my child?

Once a child is diagnosed with autism, financial and community support may be available. Government funding is constantly being reviewed and updated and these changes can affect the availability of support. Please follow the links below for the most recent details of support packages.

- Government financial support may be available for your child and family. Aspect provides up-to-date information at: <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/financial-assistance>.
- Workshops: Aspect offers a range of evidence-informed workshops designed to support families, child care works and allied health professionals, adolescents and adults. These workshops are run by experienced professionals. For more information about Aspect workshops go to: <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/workshops-resources>.

- Fact Sheets: The Aspect website has a range of fact sheets and current research about autism. Fact sheets are easy to read and contain the up-to-date information about issues relevant to anyone with questions about autism. The fact sheets can be found at: <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/fact-sheets>.
- Aspect Customer Service – Our friendly customer service staff are available to speak to you. Alternatively you can live chat or email a question and a personalised answer will be sent to you.

Contact Aspect Customer Service

Call 1800 277 328 Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm (East coast Australia)

Website <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/livechat>

Email customerservice@autismspectrum.org.au

References

1. Guthrie W, Swineford LB, Nottke C, Wetherby AM. Early diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder: stability and change in clinical diagnosis and symptom presentation. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 2013 May 1;54(5):582-90.
2. Koegel LK, Koegel RL, Ashbaugh K, Bradshaw J. The importance of early identification and intervention for children with or at risk for autism spectrum disorders. *International journal of speech-language pathology*. 2014 Feb 1;16(1):50-6.
3. Itzchak EB, Zachor DA. Who benefits from early intervention in autism spectrum disorders?. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. 2011 Mar 31;5(1):345-50.
4. Fernell E, Wilson P, Hadjikhani N, Bourgeron T, Neville B, Taylor D, Minnis H, Gillberg C. Screening, intervention and outcome in autism and other developmental disorders: the role of randomized controlled trials. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*. 2014 Aug 1;44(8):2074-6.
5. Tonge B, Brereton A, Kiomall M, Mackinnon A, Rinehart NJ. A randomised group comparison controlled trial of 'preschoolers with autism': A parent education and skills training intervention for young children with autistic disorder. *Autism*. 2014 Feb 1;18(2):166-77.