

Autism (ASD)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development causing major social, communication, and behavior challenges. Children with autism communicate, behave, interact, and learn in ways different than most people.

The number of children diagnosed with Autism has risen to 1 in 68 during recent years. This could be attributed to an increase in awareness of the symptoms by parents, leading to earlier diagnosis of the disorder. Autism is 5 times more common in boys than girls. The way healthcare providers diagnose autism has changed. A diagnosis of ASD now includes several conditions that used to be diagnosed separately, like autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. Now these conditions are all called ASD.



AUTISM DIAGNOSIS

ASD can be hard to diagnose. There's no medical test, like a blood test, to check for ASD. No two

children with ASD have the exact same signs or symptoms. Providers diagnose ASD by looking at your child's behavior and development. Children with ASD usually show signs or symptoms when they're 12 to 24 months old, but some may have them earlier or later.

Babies may show signs of ASD before their first birthday if they have severe developmental delays. Developmental delays are when your child doesn't reach developmental milestones when expected. A developmental milestone is a skill or activity that most children can do at a certain age. Milestones include sitting, walking, talking, having social skills, and thinking skills. Tell your baby's health care provider if your baby isn't meeting her milestones. It's not unusual for a healthy baby to fall behind in some areas or move ahead in others. But babies who don't meet these milestones need their development checked more closely by a provider:

- Babbling by 12 months
- Making gestures (like pointing or waving bye-bye) by 12 months
- Using single words by 16 months
- Using two-word phrases by 24 months
- Losing language or social skills at any age.

Most children with ASD don't have problems with early developmental milestones like crawling and walking on time, but they may have delays in other areas like communication, social, and behavior skills. If your child shows signs or symptoms of ASD, it doesn't always mean he has ASD. Children with ASD may have different signs and symptoms, and they may not have all the signs and symptoms. Examples of social symptoms of ASD include:



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difficulty learning to engage in give-and-take of everyday human interaction; avoiding eye contact; seeming to prefer being alone; indifferent to displays of affection. Children are slower in learning to interpret what others are thinking and feeling; difficulty interpreting gestures and facial expressions. Children have tendencies to react inappropriately regulating their emotions, having meltdowns and losing control when they are in a strange or overwhelming environment, feel angry or frustrated. Communication difficulties include the inability to combine words into meaningful sentences, or repeat the same phrase over and over. Children can have difficulty interpreting social cues, sarcasm or jokes. Without meaningful gestures or the language to ask for things, children with autism are at a loss to let others know what they need. Children may flap their arms or walk on their toes. Children with ASD can display sensory issues with sensitivity to clothing touching their skin, bright lights, loud noises, and food textures. It's really important to learn the signs and symptoms of ASD and get help for your child right away if you think he has ASD. The healthcare provider can play an important role in getting early intervention services as soon as possible to help improve your child's development. These services can help children from birth through 3 years old learn important skills. Services include therapy to help a child talk, walk, learn self-help skills, and interact with others.

AUTISM

IDEA and AAC have defined Autism as:

...a developmental disability that significantly affects verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction generally evident before age three (3) that adversely affects educational performance. This includes other pervasive developmental orders. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or changes in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. Autism does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disability, as defined in these rules. A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three (3) could be identified as having autism if the criteria herein are satisfied.

AAC 290-8-9.03(1)(a)

HELP IS AVAILABLE

There is a lot of help available from IDEA, beginning with a free evaluation of your child. According to IDEA, the nation's special education law, all children suspected of having a disability can be evaluated without cost to their parents to determine if they have a disability, and because of that disability, need special education services under IDEA. It is important to understand that a



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medical diagnosis does not mean the same as having a disability in education. Those special services are:

Early Intervention-a system of services to support infants and toddlers with disabilities (birth through 2) and their families. If a child is found eligible for Early Intervention services, staff work with you to develop what is known as an Individualized Family Services Plan or IFSP, which will describe your child's unique needs as well as the services he will receive to address those needs. Contact Alabama Early Intervention Services at 1-800-543-3098.

Special Education and Related Services-Services available through the public school system for school-aged children, including preschoolers (ages 3-21). The federal special education law called IDEA, and corresponding state law called Alabama Administrative Code (AAC), require that special education and related services be made available free of charge to every eligible child with a disability, including preschoolers. These services are designed to address the child's individual needs in the classroom resulting from the disability.

REFERRAL AND EVALUATION

If you feel your child is in need of special education and related services, the first step is to make a referral to your child's school indicating the challenges you've noticed, and request that he be evaluated for a disability. The team will review all data and reports and parental concerns to determine if evaluation is necessary. If the referral is accepted, a formal referral form is completed, and you must give written consent for the

evaluation to be done. The school has 60 calendar days from written consent to complete the evaluation process. If the referral is not accepted, written notice is given to the parent, and the child is referred to the school problem-solving team.

Keep in mind that a child does not have to fail in school to be eligible for special education services. A referral for special education should never be denied based solely on the student having passing grades.

An evaluation is the process of gathering information about your child, their potential disability, strengths, weaknesses, and areas of need. If your child is struggling in school and you are concerned about their learning, educational progress, social skills, or behavior, a comprehensive special education evaluation may be the information that can help you and your child's school meet your child's educational needs. The initial evaluation will serve to answer these questions:

1. Does my child have a disability?
2. Does his disability affect his educational performance?
3. Does my child need special education and related services?

Just the mere presence of a disability does not automatically qualify your child as "a child with a disability" under special education laws. Your child must meet the criteria and minimum evaluative components for Autism outlined in the Alabama Administrative Code. In addition to passing the vision and hearing screens, there must be scores on a rating scale indicating the presence of an

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autism spectrum disorder; medical, clinical, psychiatric, or school psychologist evaluation, or assessment by a qualified person trained in the area of autism evaluation; evidence that communication/language skills and/or social skills adversely affect educational performance, and evidence of current characteristics/behaviors typical of an autism spectrum disorder.

DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY

When the evaluation process has been completed, the team has 30 days to review all the assessment data and scores, and meet with all the other team members, including parents, and make an eligibility decision.

The team will collaborate and create a written report of the testing results. The report will describe your child's strengths and needs, how your child's skills compare to others of the same age or grade level, whether your child has a qualifying disability, and what individualized instruction and related services are recommended to help your child. If you disagree with the report, you have the right to request an independent educational evaluation or IEE, paid for by the school. The school is also allowed to deny your request for IEE, but it must take additional steps to prove its evaluation is appropriate.

If your child is identified as "a child with a disability" determined to be eligible, a meeting to develop the Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be held within 30 calendar days of the initial eligibility determination. The data obtained during the evaluation is used to determine what services

are required for the child to make educational progress. An IEP must be developed and in effect before special education and related services are provided. The school must obtain written informed consent from the parent before the initial provision of services to the child. The IEP could also provide accommodations for your child, examples are:

- work space with limited activity and noise distractions
- seat closer to the teacher and classroom materials
- visual prompts and color-coding to highlight and teach new information
- sensory diet and activities throughout the day
- social stories to present new ideas and situations
- being provided with choices to ease anxiety
- being provided with "wait time"
- a plan to manage meltdowns
- use of a visual timer or signal to make it easier to transition from one thing to the next
- set clear expectations and create daily routines.

Sometimes the test scores and data do not meet the qualifying criteria for disability, and your child is denied eligibility for services. If you disagree with the ineligibility decision, you have the right to appeal this decision and should inform the school. You will receive a written copy of your Special

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Education Rights from the school, which contains information on due process procedures to follow. You can also contact our staff for assistance.

RESOURCES

Alabama Department of Education, Special Education Services www.alsde.edu/sec/ses/

Children's Rehabilitation Services
www.rehab.alabama.gov/crs

Alabama Early Intervention Service
<http://www.rehab.alabama.gov/individuals-and-families/early-intervention>

Autism Society of Alabama <https://www.autism-alabama.org/>

Autism Speaks <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>

UAB Civitan/Sparks Autism Spectrum Clinic
<https://www.uab.edu/civitansparks/autism-spectrum-disorders>

School Community Toolkit
<https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/School%20Community%20Tool%20Kit.pdf>

Autism Providers Network
<http://alabamaautismproviders.com/resources.html>

YOUR OPINION MATTERS

Stakeholder opinion is very important to our center. We invite you tell us what you think and make suggestions for trainings and publications. Complete a brief survey, call our center, or join our advisory committee. Your input is always welcome.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ALPTI>



APEC IS HERE TO HELP

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