

EARLY SIGNS OF AUTISM: WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW.

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As a speech pathologist, one of the questions I am asked most often is:

"What are the early signs of autism?"

Many parents begin noticing that their child develops differently from their peers. Perhaps your child communicates in unexpected ways, prefers to play independently, has intense interests, or experiences the world differently through their senses. These differences can raise questions, but they do not mean something is "wrong."

Autism is a natural variation in human neurodevelopment. Every autistic child is unique, with their own strengths, interests and support needs. Early identification is not about changing who a child is—it is about understanding them, supporting their communication, and ensuring they have access to environments where they can thrive.

What are the early signs of autism?

Autistic children may show differences in social communication, sensory processing, play, learning and behaviour. Some children show signs in infancy, while others become more noticeable as social demands increase.

Some early signs may include: *Differences in communication...*

Communication looks different for every child.

Some autistic children may:

- Use fewer words than expected for their age.
- Communicate primarily through gestures, leading an adult's hand, facial expressions or body language.
- Repeat words or phrases (known as echolalia), which is a valid and meaningful form of communication.
- Show reduced interest in back-and-forth conversation.
- Use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) successfully alongside or instead of speech.



It is important to remember that speech is only one form of communication. Gestures, signs, AAC devices, pictures and body language are all valid ways of expressing thoughts, needs and emotions.

Differences in social interaction

Autistic children often connect with others in ways that may differ from neurotypical expectations.

You might notice your child:

- Prefers to play alongside others rather than with them.
- Shares enjoyment differently.
- Responds inconsistently to their name.
- Makes eye contact differently or less frequently.
- Enjoys social interaction but approaches it in their own unique way.

Reduced eye contact should never be viewed as something that needs to be "fixed." Many autistic people report that eye contact can be uncomfortable or distracting.

Repetitive movements and interests

Many autistic children enjoy repetitive movements or routines, including:

- Hand flapping
- Rocking
- Spinning
- Lining up toys
- Repeating favourite songs or phrases
- Developing intense interests in particular topics

These behaviours, often referred to as stimming, help many autistic people regulate their emotions, attention and sensory experiences. Stimming is generally a healthy and important form of self-regulation.

Sensory differences

Autistic children often experience the world differently through their senses.

They may be:

- Sensitive to loud noises
- Overwhelmed by busy environments
- Sensitive to clothing textures
- Drawn to movement or lights
- Seeking deep pressure or movement
- Sensitive to certain food textures

Sensory differences are a core part of many autistic people's experiences and deserve understanding rather than correction.



Every autistic child is different.

No two autistic children look exactly alike.

Some children speak early and have advanced vocabularies.

Others communicate using gestures, pictures or AAC.

Some seek lots of social interaction.

Others enjoy spending time independently.

Some require significant daily support.

Others live very independently.

Autism is a spectrum, meaning each person has a unique profile of strengths and support needs.

What should parents do if they have concerns?

If you notice developmental differences, the best first step is to speak with your GP, maternal and child health nurse, paediatrician or speech pathologist.

An assessment does not "label" a child—it helps families better understand how their child communicates and learns so they can access appropriate supports if needed.

Early support should always focus on:

- Building meaningful communication.
- Supporting emotional wellbeing.
- Respecting sensory needs.
- Encouraging participation in everyday life.
- Celebrating each child's strengths and individuality.

Children do not need to become less autistic to succeed. They need environments that understand and support them.

Helpful resources for families

The following organisations provide evidence-based, neurodiversity-informed information for parents:

- Autism CRC – <https://www.autismcrc.com.au>
- Amaze (Victoria) – <https://www.amaze.org.au>
- Raising Children Network – <https://raisingchildren.net.au>
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) <https://autisticadvocacy.org>
- CommunicationFIRST – <https://communicationfirst.org>



If your child communicates using, or may benefit from, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), you may also find these resources helpful:

- AssistiveWare – <https://www.assistiveware.com>
- PrAACtical AAC – <https://praacticalaac.org>

Final thoughts

If your child communicates, learns or experiences the world differently, know that they are not alone—and neither are you.

Autistic children have unique strengths, perspectives and ways of connecting with others. With understanding, acceptance and evidence-based support, children can develop meaningful communication skills while remaining authentically themselves.

As a speech pathologist, my goal is never to change who a child is. My role is to support communication in all its forms, empower families with practical strategies, and help children access the tools they need to express themselves with confidence.

**Every child deserves to be heard.
Every form of communication matters.**

Thank you 

