

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are used interchangeably to describe a group of complex disorders of brain development that impact how people communicate, interact, and behave.¹

DIAGNOSING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) is the primary tool for diagnosis of ASD. In order for a child to be diagnosed with ASD, the DSM-5 requires that they demonstrate a combination of: ²

Persistent deficits in social communications and interactions:

- Ability to engage in social interactions between two or more people
- Nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction
- Developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

AND

Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviors, interest, and activities:

- Repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech
- Insistence on sameness; inflexible adherence to routines
- Highly restricted, abnormally intense, and fixated interests
- Hyper- or hypoactivity to sensory input; unusual interest in sensory aspect of environment

WHY EARLY INTERVENTION MATTERS

Behaviors associated with ASD can be evident in children prior to two years old, however most signs and symptoms begin to appear between 2-3 years old.³

- Early intervention services are most effective when provided in a child's first years of life.⁴
- Early diagnosis and treatment lead to long-term improvements in skills and symptom management.⁵
- Families face barriers to accessing these services, including:



Shortage of qualified, well-trained professionals



Limited transportation options



Gaps in healthcare coverage

AUTISM AND CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS

Autism is often associated with other intellectual delays or structural/language disorders. Additionally, many individuals with autism also experience symptoms of another mental health diagnosis. For example, 70% of individual with autism may have one additional mental diagnosis, and 40% may experience two or more combined mental diagnoses. Some common co-occurring diagnoses include: ADHD, anxiety, depression, development and coordination disorders, and learning disorders.⁶

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AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN GEORGIA



66,966 children, ages 3-17, were diagnosed with autism in 2022.⁷

Factors related to apparent increase in prevalence:⁸

- Improved diagnosis criteria
- Environmental influences, such as parental age at conception, prematurity, and birth weight
- Increased awareness and earlier screenings

BEHAVIORAL ANALYSTS IN GEORGIA⁹

Applied Behavior Analysis is an evidence-based therapy used for people with autism and other developmental disorders that addresses language and communication, attention and memory, and behavior concerns.¹⁰

Certification	Doctoral (BCBA)	Master/Graduate (BCBA)	Bachelor (BCaBA)	RBT	Total
Statewide Count	101	1,911	86	11,625	13,723

BCBA: Board Certified Behavior Analyst

BCaBA: Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst

RBT: Registered Behavior Technician

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) program within the Technical College System of Georgia to help meet the state's need for a larger autism and behavioral health workforce.
- Ensure billing codes, professional development opportunities, and wellness practices support the sustainability, and expansion of, a qualified autism workforce (e.g., BCBA, BCaBA, RBT, other therapists, and qualified healthcare professionals).
- Increase funding and support to expand respite care facilities and services for children and youth with behavioral health conditions, including autism, serious emotional disturbance, and substance use disorders.
- Promote early autism identification and classroom inclusion information such as signs and symptom education materials, developmentally appropriate curriculum, resources, and agency and community supports for new and existing childcare workforce members to better serve infants and young children aged zero through four and their caregivers.
- Review and strengthen policies, procedures, state licensing provisions and quality monitoring of residential treatment for children and youth with behavioral health conditions, including serious emotional disturbance, substance use disorders, and autism.
- Expand funding to support classrooms in educating children, youth, and young adults with different cognitive, physical, and developmental abilities.
- Ensure adequate behavioral health and developmental disability training for school staff, public safety officers, and other additional discipline-related fields.

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REFERENCES FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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