

Understanding the Three Levels of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental difference that affects how people communicate, interact, and experience the world. The term *spectrum* means that autism looks different for each person. To better describe support needs, the DSM-5 outlines **three levels of autism**.

Level 1: Requiring Support

- **Social Communication:** May struggle with back-and-forth conversations, reading social cues, or making friends.
- **Behaviors:** May need help managing routines or flexibility when plans change.
- **Support Needs:** Occasional support in social situations, therapy for social skills, and guidance with organization.

Level 2: Requiring Substantial Support

- **Social Communication:** Noticeable difficulties with verbal and nonverbal communication. Conversations may be limited.
- **Behaviors:** Repetitive actions or strong interests may interfere with daily life. Difficulty coping with changes.
- **Support Needs:** Consistent support at school, work, and home. Structured environments and specialized therapies are often helpful.

Level 3: Requiring Very Substantial Support

- **Social Communication:** Severe challenges in communication. May use few words or rely on alternative communication methods.
- **Behaviors:** Repetitive behaviors and resistance to change are highly pronounced.
- **Support Needs:** Daily, intensive support. Assistance with self-care, communication, and adapting to environments.

Key Takeaways

- **Levels describe support needs, not a person's worth or potential.**
- Every autistic person is unique—strengths and challenges vary widely.
- Supports should be individualized, flexible, and respectful.
- Labels like “high-functioning” or “low-functioning” are discouraged; instead, focus on what helps each person thrive.

Why This Matters

Understanding autism levels helps families, educators, and communities provide the right support. Whether it's occasional guidance or daily assistance, recognizing these differences fosters inclusion, respect, and empowerment.