

Autism and Co-Occurring Conditions

For Early Childhood Educators: Understanding the Full Picture

Autism often co-occurs with other diagnoses and conditions that impact learning, behavior, and development. Understanding these can help educators recognize and support diverse representations of autism in early childhood settings.

Neurodevelopmental Conditions

- **ADHD** – Affects 50–70% of autistic individuals
Source: Hours et al., 2022; Front Psychiatry
- **Apraxia of Speech** – Impairs speech motor planning; affects up to 65% of autistic children
Source: AutismSpeaks.org
- **Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)** – Motor difficulties affect up to 86.9% of children with autism
Source: Bhat, SPARK Study, 2020
- **Intellectual Disability** – Often co-occurs but is distinct from autism; misdiagnosis is common
Source: Emily Sohn, The Transmitter, 2020

Cognitive and Emotional Processing

- **Alexithymia** – Difficulty identifying and expressing emotions; present in ~50% of autistic people
Source: Kinnaird et al., Eur Psychiatry, 2019
- **Echolalia** – Repetition of phrases; common communication tool, present in 75–80% of verbal autistic individuals
Source: Xie et al., Front Psychol, 2023
- **Aphantasia** – Inability to visualize mental images; more common in autistic individuals
Source: Rachel King et al., Conscious Cogn, 2024

Sensory and Processing Disorders

- **Auditory Processing Disorder** – Challenges interpreting sounds and speech patterns
Source: Autism.org
- **Sensory Processing Disorder** – Impacts ~90% of autistic individuals; includes hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to light, sound, texture
Source: Passarello et al., Brain Sci, 2022
- **Central Sensitivity Syndrome (CSS)** – Includes conditions like fibromyalgia and IBS; affects 21–40% of adults with autism
Source: Al-Beltagej, 2021
- **Vision & Hearing Impairments** – Higher risk of autism in children with these impairments
Source: Ludwig et al., Clin Neuropsychol, 2022

Sleep, Eating, and Physical Health

- **Sleep Disorders** – Affect 44–83% of autistic children
Source: Williams et al., J Sleep Res, 2004

- **ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)** – Present in 12.5–33.3% of autistic individuals
Source: Pediatrix/Blox
- **Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS)** – Joint hypermobility and connective tissue disorder highly comorbid with autism
Source: J Pers Med, 2020
- **Epilepsy/Seizures** – Seen in 26% of children with autism over age 13
Source: Viscidi et al., PLoS One, 2013
- **Tuberous Sclerosis** – Rare genetic disorder with strong ASD correlation
Source: Vignoli et al., Orphanet J Rare Dis, 2015

Mental Health Conditions

- **Anxiety** – Affects at least 50% of autistic individuals regularly
Source: Autism.org.uk
- **Depression** – Higher prevalence in autistic people across lifespan
Source: Autism.org.uk
- **OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)** – Common co-occurrence; can intensify autistic traits
Source: International OCD Foundation
- **Bipolar Disorder** – Genetic links between autism and bipolar disorder
Source: NeurodivergentInsights.com
- **Psychosis** – May occur in 34.8% of autistic individuals
Source: Ribolsi et al., Front Psychiatry, 2022
- **Schizophrenia** – 3–6 times more likely in autistic youth
Source: Jutla et al., Autism Res, 2022
- **Trauma** – Autistic individuals are more likely to experience trauma and may not receive appropriate support
Source: Lobregt-van Buuren et al., Exon Publications, 2021

Gender and Identity

- **Gender Dysphoria & Gender Diversity** – Individuals are 3–6 times more likely to be autistic
Source: Dattaro, The Transmitter, 2020
- **Tourette's Syndrome** – Co-occurs in 21% of children with Tourette's
Source: McPherson, Autism Parenting, 2024

Why This Matters in Early Childhood

Understanding co-occurring conditions helps:

- **Recognize the diversity of autistic experiences**
- **Avoid mislabeling or missing signs** of autism in children with complex presentations
- **Improve support strategies**, accommodations, and classroom inclusion
- **Create a culture of acceptance** that embraces neurodiversity from the start