



Early Childhood Signs of Autism

Communication & Language

- **Delayed, unusual, or highly advanced speech development**
- **Echolalia** or **scripting** used as meaningful communication
- May speak fluently but struggle with **pragmatic language** (e.g., turn-taking, tone, or volume control)
- Uses **metaphor, analogy, or rich internal worlds** but avoids direct conversation
- May switch between multiple accents or speech styles to match others (**code-switching**)
- Communicates through **gestures, art, or written forms** more than spoken language

Social Interaction

- **Intensely observant of social dynamics** but struggles with reciprocity
- Plays **beside** rather than **with** others, even in familiar environments
- **Mirrors others' behaviors, speech, or interests** to fit in (social camouflaging)
- Struggles with **emotional reciprocity**, especially recognizing or expressing their own feelings
- May appear **socially appropriate** at school but **disconnect or shut down** at home
- Cultural norms around **eye contact, personal space, or formality** may affect how traits are perceived or misunderstood
- **Parent/caregiver discipline or behavior expectations** rooted in culture may mask or complicate autism presentation

Behavior & Play

- Intense interest in **narrow or specific topics**, sometimes seen as “giftedness”
- **Repetitive play themes** (e.g., dramatic re-enactments, object spinning, world-building)
- Difficulty with **transitions**, even between preferred activities
- Play may involve **nontraditional gender roles**, symbolism, or self-directed narratives
- Behaviors may be dismissed as **cultural learning styles** or **creative personality**
- **PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance)**: Avoids tasks even when capable, especially when demands feel imposed, often misunderstood as defiance

Sensory Processing

- Over- or under-responsive to **sensory input** (e.g., pain, hunger, noise)
- May crave **deep pressure, movement, or sensory stimulation** others find overwhelming
- Difficulties may present as “**picky**,” “**lazy**,” or “**dramatic**” depending on cultural perceptions
- Expresses **distress through shutdowns, meltdowns, or aggression** when overstimulated
- Sensory sensitivity may contribute to **gender expression discomfort** (e.g., tags, textures, grooming routines)



Contextual & Cultural Considerations

- Behaviors often **minimized or overlooked** in BIMPOC, multilingual, or immigrant children
- Traits explained away as:
 - “just a phase”
 - “cultural” (e.g., quietness, obedience, deference)
 - “gender-based” (e.g., shy girl, hyperactive boy)
- **Fear of stigma** may lead families to delay screening or services
- **Misdiagnosis or late diagnosis** common in girls, gender-expansive kids, and BIPOC children
- Interpreted as “willful,” “oppositional,” or “badly parented” when masking breaks down

Neurodivergent Presentation Nuances

- **Masking:** Child may “hold it together” at school and **collapse at home**, leading to misunderstanding of support needs
- **PDA profile:** Rigid avoidance of demands, often due to **anxiety about autonomy or unpredictability**
- **Gender-diverse** children may express autism through discomfort with roles, routines, or sensory aspects of clothing/body changes
- **Intersectionality matters:** Autism traits are often filtered through lenses of race, class, gender, and cultural norms, leading to **missed or incorrect diagnoses**