



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 008 | Neurodevelopmental conditions

Autism spectrum disorder

What it means

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition involving differences in social communication and interaction, together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or sensory responses. Autistic children have varied strengths and support needs. Autism is not defined by a single behavior, speech level, or personality. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Autism is associated with complex genetic and developmental influences. No single explanation applies to every child. Some genetic conditions can be associated with autism, and risk can be higher in some families. Autism is not caused by a caregiver being insufficiently affectionate or by a child's exposure to more than one language. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Patterns may include differences in back-and-forth interaction, sharing interests, gestures, play, or response to name; repetitive movements or speech; strong preferences for predictability; and unusual sensory responses. Some children have language delays or lose skills. No single sign, including limited eye contact, establishes the diagnosis. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

Diagnosis is based on developmental history and observed behavior, often using structured tools and caregiver reports. There is no blood test that diagnoses autism. Screening identifies children who need fuller assessment; it is not a diagnosis. Hearing, language, cognitive, adaptive, and medical needs should also be considered, with referrals guided by findings. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Individualized support can include speech-language therapy and AAC, caregiver-mediated developmental or behavioral approaches, occupational therapy, and educational accommodations. Goals should improve communication, comfort, safety, relationships, and participation. Medicines may treat associated concerns such as seizures, sleep problems, or severe distress; they do not remove autism. Avoid approaches promising a cure or requiring unsafe restrictions. [1,2,3,4]

Support at home

Use predictable routines and clear communication, offer choices, and follow the child's interests. Respect sensory needs and communicate through the methods that work. Progress may mean easier participation or reduced distress, not simply appearing less autistic.

When to seek help

Loss of skills, suspected seizures, unsafe wandering, severe sleep or feeding problems, or self-injury requires timely assessment and an individualized safety plan.

Questions for your care team

- What are this child's communication strengths and access needs?
- Which supports have evidence for our specific goals?
- How will the plan respect the child's comfort and preferences?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss autism spectrum disorder. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition involving differences in social communication and interaction, together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or sensory responses. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Autistic children can form close relationships; how they express connection may differ.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Spectrum: varied combinations of characteristics and needs.
- Screening: identifying whether more assessment is needed.
- AAC: communication methods beyond speech.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] About Autism Spectrum Disorder

<https://www.cdc.gov/autism/about/index.html>

[2] Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder

<https://www.cdc.gov/autism/signs-symptoms/index.html>

[3] Screening for Autism Spectrum Disorder

<https://www.cdc.gov/autism/diagnosis/index.html>

[4] Treatment and Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder

<https://cdc.gov/autism/treatment/index.html>