

# Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)



Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects, among other things, the way an individual relates to his or her environment and their interaction with other people.

The word 'spectrum' describes the range of difficulties that people on the autism spectrum may experience and the degree to which they may be affected. Some people may be able to live relatively normal lives, while others may have an accompanying learning challenges and require continued specialist support.

## How common is ASD

People with ASD tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items. Again, the symptoms of people with ASD will fall on a continuum, with some individuals showing mild symptoms and others having much more severe symptoms.

According to the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders, 1 in 160 Australian children aged between 6 and 12 years old has an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), making it more common than many other childhood conditions.

There are gender differences in the occurrence of autism. Boys are four times more likely than girls to have Autistic disorder and boys are nine times more likely than girls to have Asperger's disorder. ASD describes a cluster of disorders, including:

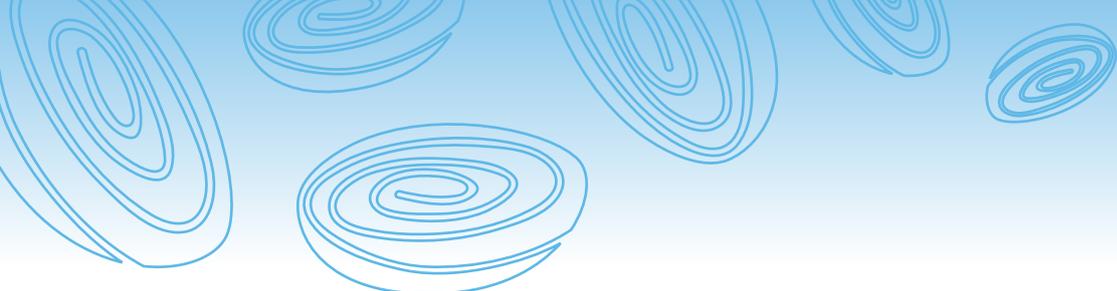
- Autistic disorder
- Asperger's disorder (also known as Asperger's syndrome)
- Pervasive developmental disorder not-otherwise-specified
- Retts disorder
- Childhood Disintegrative disorder

## The cluster of disorders

**Autistic disorder** – diagnosed early between birth and 3 years of age. It is identified when children may experience developmental delays, problems with communication and social interactions, and/or unusual behaviours. They may also develop repetitive or particular interests.

**Asperger's disorder** – diagnosed where children or teenagers develop typical early language and cognitive skills, however they experience difficulties in social interaction, delayed motor skills, particular interests and may have difficulty understanding the abstract use of language such as humour.

**Retts disorder** – diagnosed when children have initially healthy development through the first five months, and then between five and 30 months they may experience difficulty with developmental milestones and social interactions, reduced head growth and specific hand movements. Retts disorder is almost exclusively found in girls.



**Childhood Disintegrative disorder** – rare condition characterised by late onset of developmental delays that occurs around two to three years of age. It affects verbal communication, muscle control, social play and toileting skills.

**Pervasive developmental disorders** – diagnosis used for children in the autistic spectrum who do not meet the full criteria of the other categories. These children may only have a small amount of identifiable symptoms which are not enough to determine a diagnosis of one of the four main disorders.

## Autism indicators

Autism Spectrum Australia has developed a basic checklist of indicators to help parents understand whether their child may have the a Spectrum Disorder

### Social interaction and communication

- looks away when you speak to him/her
- does not return your smile
- lack of interest in other children
- often seems to be in his/her own world
- lack of ability to imitate simple motor movements eg. clapping hands
- prefers to play alone
- very limited social play (eg “Peek-a-Boo” )
- not responding to his/her name by 12 months
- not pointing or waving by 12 months
- loss of words previously used
- unusual language pattern (e.g. repetitive speech)

### Behaviour

- has unusual interests or attachments
- has unusual motor movements such as hand flapping, spinning or walking on tiptoes
- has difficulty coping with change
- unusual distress reaction to some everyday sounds
- uses peripheral vision to look at objects
- preoccupation with certain textures or avoids certain textures
- plays with objects in unusual ways such as repetitive spinning or lining up

**If you suspect that your child may have autism, it is important that you consult with a qualified medical professional. This would be your General Practitioner and / or Paediatrician in the first instance.**

### What Can You Do To Support Someone Who Has an ASD?

Orygen Youth Health suggests that any approach to support someone with ASD needs to be unique and individualised:

- Encourage the person to talk about what’s going on for them, troubles or worries that they have. It might be hard for them to find the right words or to express themselves, so be patient and try other preferred routes for communication stories/drawings.
- Help them build confidence through doing things that build on their strengths.
- Some people with ASD can find being around other young people who feel ‘different’ a supportive experience. Groups at schools, local councils and health services might be one option, but internet forums and chat rooms can also be helpful and accessible.
- Have a routine and try to be consistent. It doesn’t need to be too rigid, but might mean that a young person with ASD can begin to take advantage of planned opportunities to talk to you about their worries or hopes.
- Be patient. It takes a lot longer for people with ASD to get used to things and make changes in their lives.



# ASD, Adolescence and Mental Illness

Adolescence is a tricky time, and for young people with ASD, things like more complex social demands, increasingly difficult skills to be learned at school and at home, and transitions such as graduating might all be major stressors. It is often at this time that young people with ASD and others around them might become more alert to their social differences. Young people with ASD might feel excluded and bullied, and they themselves might feel frustrated by their difference. These negative experiences can leave young people with ASD at risk of low self-esteem, and increased risk of depression and anxiety. When young people with ASD develop mental illness, diagnosis and treatment need to be tailored to account for the young person's different personality style, and their differences in the areas of socialising, communication and interests.

## Diagnosis

Some young people begin seeing a mental health service and during their treatment, suspicions they (or their family) might have about an ASD might be raised. Diagnosis of an ASD is a reasonably lengthy process involving multiple health professionals. Diagnosis is important for young people, in order to be able to provide effective treatment options into the future.

## Treatment

Effective treatment targets the mental health problem, and supports the young person to adjust to the difficulties they have as a result of ASD, as well as to make use of the skills that they have. Many people with ASD might still find social situations, personal relationships and major life changes challenging. With support and encouragement, many people go on to undertake further education, develop their interests through hobbies and membership to clubs, work successfully in jobs that interest them, and find friendships that are fulfilling.



## Want more information?

### Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT) Autism Information line 02 8977 8377

<http://www.autismnsw.com.au/publications/infosheets.asp>

### Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800

Phone, web or email counselling, resources and activities for children and young people 5 to 25 years.

[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

### Parentline NSW

Phone 1300 1300 52

For advice on child health and parenting.

[www.parentline.org.au](http://www.parentline.org.au)

### Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 224 636, 24 hours

Speak to a mental health professional about how you feel no matter how big or small the problem.

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

### Lifeline

Phone 13 11 14, 24 hours

Crisis support and suicide prevention.

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

### Healthy Minds

Phone 1300 137 237

Healthy Minds allows people who have a health care card to access a psychologist at no cost. You will need to go to your GP and ask for a Healthy Minds referral under the 'Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS)', and your GP will have a list of participating psychologists that they can refer you to.

## Local Services

### Lismore Community Health - Child and Family

Phone 02 6620 7687

8am – 5:00pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment.

### Headspace

Phone 02 6625 0200

National Youth Mental health service for 12 - 25 year olds.

### Lismore Community Mental Health

Phone 02 6620 2300

60 Hunter Street, LISMORE, 2480

### Mental health Access Line

Phone 1800 011 511

### Social Futures - Ability Links

Phone 1300 792 940

Support people with disability, their families and carers by providing them with a locally based first point of contact to access supports and services in the local community

### Family Support Network

Phone 02 6621 2489

Family Workers can offer you practical and emotional support to enhance & strengthen your parenting & family relationships.

[www.fsn.org.au](http://www.fsn.org.au)

*Refer to Service Listing for contact details of other local services*

