

What is Autism?

Autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder – ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a child **communicates, interacts, learns, behaves, and processes sensory information**. It usually begins in early childhood and may become noticeable when a child does not achieve expected developmental milestones or shows differences in interaction and communication patterns.

As per **CDC, USA, 2025***, approximately **1 in 31 children** are identified with autism. This highlights the growing need for **early awareness, timely identification, and structured intervention**.

Autism is called a *spectrum* because it presents differently in every child. Some children may have challenges in communication, others in behavior or sensory regulation, while many may show a combination of these. The key areas where differences are commonly observed include:

- Communication (speech, understanding, expression)
- Social interaction (eye contact, response, engagement)
- Behaviour patterns (repetitive actions, rigidity)
- Sensory processing (over or under reaction to sounds, touch, movement, etc.)

Common Early Signs (Red Flags to Observe)

Parents and caregivers may observe the following signs, especially in early childhood:

1. Does not respond to name consistently
2. Limited or no eye contact
3. Delayed speech or absence of meaningful speech
4. Does not point, wave, or use gestures appropriately
5. Prefers to play alone most of the time
6. Limited interest in interacting with others
7. Repeats words or phrases (echolalia)
8. Lines up toys or objects repeatedly
9. Strong preference for routines; difficulty with change
10. Limited or no pretend/imaginative play
11. Difficulty understanding or following simple instructions
12. Unusual attachment to specific objects
13. Difficulty expressing needs or wants
14. Hyperactivity, impulsivity, or difficulty sustaining attention
15. Limited sharing of interest (does not show or bring objects to others)

Examples of Repetitive (Stereotypical) Behaviours

- Hand flapping, spinning, rocking
- Repeatedly opening/closing objects
- Watching spinning or moving objects for long durations
- Repeating the same activity again and again

Examples of Sensory Concerns

- Covering ears to everyday sounds
- Overreaction or underreaction to pain
- Avoiding certain textures (clothes, food, surfaces)
- Fascination with lights, fans, or moving objects
- Seeking excessive movement (jumping, crashing, spinning)

Important to Understand

It is **not necessary that a few of these signs always indicate autism**. Many of these behaviours can also be seen as normal variations in development.

However, if a child shows **multiple signs consistently and in a pattern**, it is important to seek professional guidance. You may consult any of the following professionals:

- Developmental Pediatrician
- Child Psychiatrist
- Pediatric Neurologist
- Clinical Psychologist

A timely evaluation helps in understanding the child's developmental profile and planning the next steps appropriately.

Management and Role of Parents

Autism is managed through **need-based, integrated intervention**, where different therapies are combined based on the child's individual profile. These may include Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Behavior Therapy, and Special Education.

Rather than working in isolation, these therapies are most effective when delivered in a **coordinated and integrated manner**, aligned with the child's developmental needs.

One of the most important aspects of intervention is **parental involvement**. Children learn best in their natural environment, and when parents are actively involved, therapy continues beyond sessions into everyday life.

With the right guidance, structured intervention, and consistent parental participation, children can show **meaningful developmental progress over time**.

Why Early Identification Matters

Early childhood is a crucial period of development, where the brain is more adaptable and responsive to structured support.

The **earlier a concern is identified and managed**, the better are the chances of improved outcomes.

Early support, timely intervention, and active parental involvement can make a significant difference in a child's journey.

***Reference:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025). *Data and statistics on autism spectrum disorder*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data/index.html>