

ASD (AUTISM)

UNDERSTANDING AUTISM

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how individuals communicate and relate to others, as well as how they perceive and experience the world.

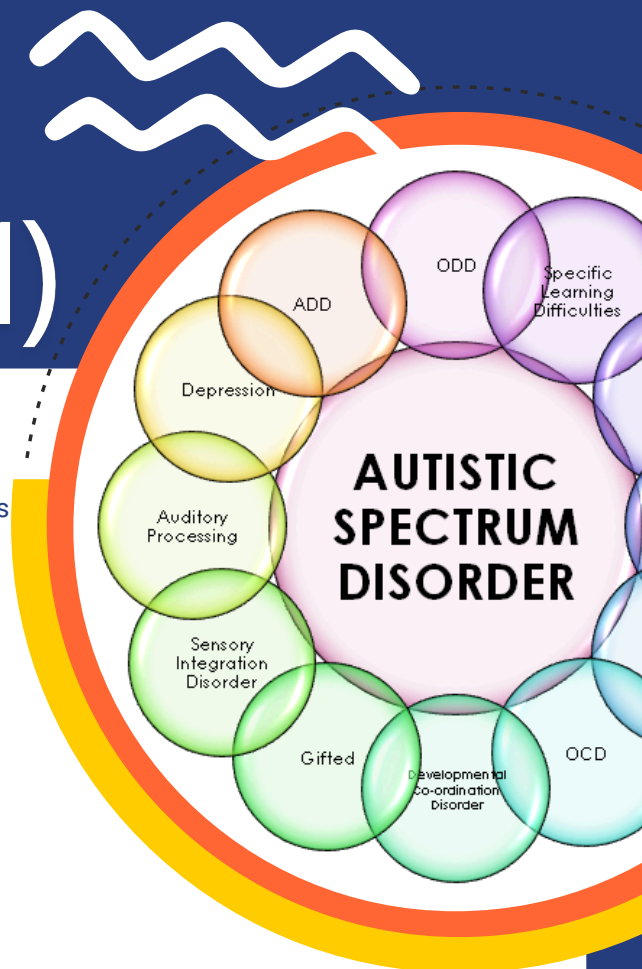
Autism is a spectrum condition, meaning it affects each person differently. Factors influencing the presentation of autism include:

- Learning ability
- Language skills
- Past experiences
- Personal qualities
- Health factors
- Mental health issues
- Additional conditions

Autism is a lifelong condition and cannot be “treated” or “cured” and the idea of this is offensive to many, for whom being autistic is an integral part of their identity. Research suggests autism is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors that affect brain and central nervous system development.

In the UK, around 700,000 people are on the autism spectrum, more than 1 in 100. Including their families, autism impacts the daily lives of approximately 2.8 million people (National Autistic Society).

(Taken from the Kent Autistic Trust)



COMMON SIGNS

The common signs of autism in children and young people can include:

- communication differences, such as delayed speech development
- repetitive behaviour and thought processes, for example lining up toys
- self-stimulatory movements, for example hand-flapping
- being sensitive to certain sensory aspects, such as sounds and textures
- the inability to recognise non-verbal forms of communication
- not able to understand what others are thinking or feeling or express their feelings
- struggling to cope with transitions and changes.

THE REFERRAL PROCESS

An ASD referral can be completed by us in school or by a health professional. It is important that we have clear and sufficient evidence and family history prior to making a referral for your child to be assessed.

All referrals must include the appropriate supplementary information from both school and home. The forms can be found on our school website.

The following steps should be taken if you would like a referral for your child:

1. Discussion with class teacher to raise your concerns
2. Meeting with SENCO to gather additional information from the home setting - examples of behaviours and experiences at home are helpful
3. Class teacher starts to, or continues to gather evidence in school
4. SENCO will liaise with parent and inform when enough evidence has been gathered for a referral.



THE PROCESS...CONTINUED

Once a referral has been made, the Community Paediatricians at Kent and Canterbury hospital will take the following steps:

Triage/ screening

Once all forms are completed the referral will be screened to ensure the child has been referred to the most appropriate service, once this is confirmed the referral will be accepted.

Outcome

The referral will be allocated to a paediatrician who will triage the referral to ensure the child is seen in the most appropriate clinic. The referrer will be notified of acceptance of the referral. If the referral does not meet the service criteria the referrer will be notified and advised of where to refer the child to.

Initial appointment

Within a few months of the referral being made, you will be offered an initial appointment. During this appointment, a detailed history will be taken and an assessment of current concerns.

After the initial appointment, if the paediatricians agree that there is sufficient evidence for an ASD assessment, they will send out specific screening questionnaires to the parent/ carer and to the school.

Follow up

Once all specific screening questionnaires have been received, it will be decided whether your child meets the threshold to be placed on the waiting list for a full ASD assessment. Your child can be on this waiting list for up to 14 months.

Autism timeline

Accepted for assessment

↓ Up to 14 months*

Initial assessment

↓ Same day

Plan of care agreed*

CONTACTING COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH (FOR WAITING TIMES)

Dover

Tel: 01304 222521

Email: ekh-tr.childhealthbhd@nhs.net

Address: Children's Assessment Unit, Buckland Hospital, Coombe Valley Road, Dover CT17 0HD

Canterbury

Tel: 01227 866482

Email: ekh-tr.childhealthcanterbury@nhs.net

Address: Children's Assessment Centre, Kent and Canterbury Hospital, Ethelbert Road, Canterbury CT1 3NG

DIFFICULTIES + CHALLENGES

Social communication

Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand sarcasm or tone of voice. Other challenges include:

- taking things literally and not understanding abstract concepts
- needing extra time to process information or answer questions
- repeating what others say to them (this is called echolalia)

Social interaction

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard to navigate the social world. Autistic people may:

- appear to be insensitive
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate
- find it hard to form friendships.

Repetitive and restrictive behaviours

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people. This is why they often prefer to have routines so that they know what is going to happen. They may want to travel the same way to and from school or work, wear the same clothes or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Autistic people may also repeat movements such as hand flapping, rocking or the repetitive use of an object such as twirling a pen or opening and closing a door. Autistic people often engage in these behaviours to help calm themselves when they are stressed or anxious, but many autistic people do it because they find it enjoyable. Change to routine can also be very distressing and make them very anxious. It could be having to adjust to big events like Christmas or changing schools, or something simpler like a bus detour that can trigger their anxiety.

Meltdowns

When everything becomes too much for an autistic person, they can go into meltdown or shutdown. These are very intense and exhausting experiences.

A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be verbal (eg shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (eg kicking, lashing out, biting) or both. Meltdowns in children are often mistaken for temper tantrums and parents and their autistic children often experience hurtful comments and judgmental stares from less understanding members of the public.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a real difficulty for many autistic adults, particularly in social situations or when facing change. It can affect a person psychologically and physically and impact quality of life for autistic people and their families. It is very important that autistic people learn to recognise their triggers and find coping mechanisms to help reduce their anxiety. However, many autistic people have difficulty recognising and regulating their emotions. Over one third of autistic people have serious mental health issues and too many autistic people are being failed by mental health services.

Over- or under-sensitivity

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. Many autistic people prefer not to hug due to discomfort, which can be misinterpreted as being cold and aloof. Many autistic people avoid everyday situations because of their sensitivity issues. Schools, workplaces and shopping centres can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload.