



Understanding Autism

A guide for parents and families

Autism Basics

What is Autism? Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a person communicates, interacts with others, and experiences the world. It is called a spectrum because each individual is unique; no two people with autism are exactly alike.

Autism is not a disease to be cured; it is a different way of thinking and processing the world. With the right support, children and adults with autism can thrive, grow, and contribute incredible gifts to their families and communities.

Common Characteristics of Autism

Autism presents differently in each individual, but some common characteristics include:

- **Communication differences:** Delayed speech or language development, repeating words or phrases (echolalia), difficulty holding back-and-forth conversations, nonverbal communication styles (gestures, pointing, pictures, or devices)
- **Social interaction differences:** May prefer to play alone or struggle with group play, difficulty understanding body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice, may appear uninterested in others but often desire connection in their own way
- **Behavior and interests:** Repetitive behaviors (hand-flapping, rocking, lining up toys), strong interests in specific topics, objects, or routines, need for consistency and predictability (struggles with sudden changes)
- **Sensory differences:** Hypersensitivity (overly sensitive to lights, sounds, textures, or smells), hyposensitivity (seeks extra input like spinning, jumping, or touching)

objects often), may cover ears, avoid certain foods/clothing textures, or crave deep pressure hugs

Early Signs to Look For

Recognizing autism early can help families access resources and support sooner. Some early signs may appear between 12–24 months, though every child develops differently:

- Limited eye contact or response to their name
- Not pointing to objects of interest by 18 months
- Not using gestures (waving, shaking head “no”) by 12 months
- No single words by 16 months, or no two-word phrases by 24 months
- Loss of previously acquired speech or social skills
- Little interest in playing pretend or imitating others
- Unusual reactions to sound, smell, taste, look, or feel of things

Key Takeaways for Parents

Important reminders for parents:

- Autism is not caused by parenting—it is a neurological difference.
- Every child develops differently; milestones may not look the same.
- Early support, therapies, and accommodations can make a significant difference.
- Your child’s autism does not define them—it’s just one part of who they are.
- Most importantly: You are not alone.

Therapies & Supports

No two children need the same plan. Supports should be individualized:

- **Speech Therapy:** helps with language, communication, and social interaction.
- **Occupational Therapy (OT):** builds skills for daily living, sensory integration, and fine motor skills.
- **Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA):** evidence-based strategies to teach skills and reduce challenging behaviors.

- **Social Skills Training:** group or one-on-one settings to practice peer interactions.
- **Counseling / Play Therapy:** supports emotional well-being and coping.
- **Parent Training:** equips families to continue strategies at home.

Tip: The best therapy is one that meets your child where they are, respects their dignity, and builds on strengths.

Strengths of Autism

Autism is not only about challenges—it also comes with unique strengths:

- Attention to detail – noticing patterns others miss.
- Strong memory – especially for facts, interests, and routines.
- Passion for interests – can lead to careers and innovations.
- Honesty and authenticity – often very direct and genuine.
- Unique perspectives – problem-solving and creativity that think “outside the box.”

Families should celebrate these strengths and encourage schools and communities to build on them.

Binder Tools for Families

Helpful resources to keep in your binder:

- Sample questions to ask doctors during evaluations
- Sample therapy goal sheets for parents to track progress
- Positive traits worksheet: “My Child’s Strengths” (parents can fill in and share with teachers)

Summary

This document has provided an overview of autism, including its characteristics, early signs, key takeaways for parents, available therapies and supports, and the unique strengths associated with autism. Remember that every individual with autism is different, and early support can make a significant difference in their lives. By

understanding and celebrating the unique perspectives and strengths of individuals with autism, we can create more inclusive and supportive communities.

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This resource is provided by Averi Speaks to support families, caregivers, and communities impacted by autism.

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Together, we can create a more inclusive world.