

Diagnosing autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Learn how we reach a diagnosis—and why it's important.

Unfortunately, there are no simple lab tests for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (although some lab tests may be ordered to help rule out other conditions). Instead, our developmental evaluation team must carefully observe your child's behavior and abilities and make a determination based on a set of established diagnostic criteria.

The diagnostic criteria

There are three disorders grouped within the ASD category: autistic disorder (or "classic" autism), Asperger syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). In this section, we address the diagnostic criteria for autistic disorder only.

The American Psychiatric Association is responsible for putting forth the official diagnostic criteria for autistic disorder. To meet the definition of autism disorder according to these criteria, your child must display at least six behavioral symptoms in the following categories prior to age 3:

- 1. Impaired social interaction** (*must display at least two symptoms*): Includes impaired nonverbal behaviors (for example, facial expressions), failure to develop relationships, a lack of spontaneous interaction or play, and a lack of reciprocal emotions.
- 2. Impaired communication** (*must display at least one symptom*): Includes a delay in or lack of spoken language, an inability to initiate or sustain conversation, repetitive language, and a lack of imaginative or imitative play.
- 3. Restricted, repetitive behavior** (*must display at least one symptom*): Includes abnormal patterns of interest, inflexible routines, repetitive movements (for example, hand flapping), and a preoccupation with parts of objects.

As you can see by the requirement for two symptoms in the first category, difficulty with social interaction is the hallmark feature of autistic disorder.

Why does my child need to be diagnosed?

Some parents question the need to undergo the diagnostic process in the first place, citing the fact that there is no cure for ASD even if it is diagnosed. But there are several key reasons to stick with the evaluation process until some type of diagnosis is reached.

First, a diagnosis allows your child's care team to tailor interventions based on your child's specific disorder and level of functioning. In addition, the evaluation process gathers a wealth of detailed observations about your child's strengths and weaknesses. All of this information helps ensure the best care possible for your child moving forward.

Furthermore, a diagnosis of ASD may be required to access publicly funded ASD services, including those provided by early intervention programs (if your child is under the age of 3) and school district special education programs (if your child is over the age of 3). Because autism is included under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a child diagnosed with autism is entitled to receive a free public education that is appropriate for his or her abilities.

Moving forward with hope and optimism.