

# AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)



## About ASD

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that is characterized by varying degrees of difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and behavioral challenges. Individuals with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and/or learn in a variety of ways, ranging from gifted to severely delayed.

In May 2013 the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5)<sup>1</sup> by the American Psychiatric Association was published. The new manual merged Pervasive Developmental Disorders, which collapsed autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder–not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger’s Syndrome, into one category, autism spectrum disorder. Today the CDC estimates that 1 in 68 children have ASD.<sup>2</sup> Research studies indicate that one in every 42 boys and one in every 189 girls has ASD.<sup>3</sup>

The signs and symptoms of ASD often begin to be apparent to those in the child’s environment around 18 months to 3 years of age; however, some more subtle signs are present much earlier. If a family, early intervention team, school, and/or physician have any of the following concerns about a given child, it is recommended that the child be screened for ASD to determine if further evaluation is necessary.

## Social Skills – Warning Signs

- Child does not point at objects to show interest (for example, does not point at an airplane flying over).
- Child does not look at objects when another person points at her.
- Child has trouble relating to others or has no interest in other people at all.
- Child avoids eye contact and wants to be alone.
- Child has trouble understanding other people’s feelings or talking about his own feelings.
- Child prefers not to be held or cuddled, or might cuddle only when she wants to.

## Communication – Warning Signs

- Child appears to be unaware when people talk to her, but respond to other sounds.
- Child can be very interested in people, but not know how to talk, play, or relate to them.
- Child repeats or echoes words or phrases said to him, or repeats words or phrases in place of typical language.
- Child has trouble expressing her needs using typical words or motions.
- Child does not play “pretend” games (for example, unable to pretend to “feed” a doll).

## Behavior – Warning Signs

- Child repeats actions over and over again.
- Child has trouble adapting when a routine changes.
- Child has unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound.
- Child loses skills she once had (e.g., stops saying words she was previously using).

## Symptoms and Interventions

	Symptoms	Interventions
<b>Classroom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiences difficulty following verbal directions</li> <li>• Struggles with peer and adult interactions</li> <li>• Experiences confusion about instruction</li> <li>• Struggles maintaining attention</li> <li>• Experiences communication difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use simple and concrete language with visual supports</li> <li>• Teach specific social rules/skills (e.g., turn taking, social distance)</li> <li>• Give student two to three choices to pick from</li> <li>• Provide a very clear structure and set daily routine with a visual schedule</li> <li>• Provide a functional communication system (e.g., sign language, PECS, AT device) with access across all contexts</li> </ul>
<b>School Work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty managing pacing on timed tests</li> <li>• Difficulty attending to salient features of instruction</li> <li>• Difficulty knowing how to chunk work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow for extended time on tests</li> <li>• Provide alternate place for test taking</li> <li>• Modify tests to include word banks or equation sheets</li> <li>• Use task analysis and place tasks in a sequential order with visual instruction</li> </ul>

## MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE: ASD

<b>School Work (cont.)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty applying organizational structure to personal space, assignments, and supplies in a way that promotes independence and success.</li> <li>• Struggles with abstract language and concepts</li> <li>• Experiences difficulties with reading comprehension</li> <li>• Experiences difficulties with sequencing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a visual of how much work to anticipate and teach what “finished” means</li> <li>• Break down assignments into manageable parts</li> <li>• Work to expand the student’s reinforcement and leisure activities repertoire</li> <li>• Pay close attention to noise, lighting, food, textures. Partner with an occupational therapist to embed sensory-related strategies into school work</li> </ul>
<b>Desk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is distractible</li> <li>• Demonstrates limited interest in activities</li> <li>• Avoids sensory input or engages in sensory-seeking activities to the detriment of the task at hand</li> <li>• Unable to sit still and remain seated for an age-appropriate length of time or, conversely, unable to physically engage in learning activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide structured systems that are clear to the student (e.g., designate spots for objects on desk/locker; create a binder/folder system for homework; use checklists or planners)</li> <li>• Provide appropriate desk placement</li> <li>• Allow movement during instruction</li> <li>• Allow student to stand</li> </ul>
<b>Outside the Classroom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiences peer rejection</li> <li>• Engages in solitary play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create social opportunities with small groups</li> <li>• Create lunch bunch groups for student to practice and engage in social skills</li> <li>• Teach appropriate play skills bridging the gap between back-and-forth, sharing, parallel, and ultimately, pretend play</li> <li>• Create structured leisure activities that include peers</li> </ul>
<b>Transitions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggles with sudden changes in routine</li> <li>• Experiences difficulties with new and irregular events such as assemblies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide notice verbally or visually on the daily schedule</li> <li>• Create a social narrative using the child as the main character about a new event or change in schedule</li> <li>• Visually let the child know of changes</li> <li>• Provide a functional communication system</li> <li>• Provide visuals to ask for a “break”</li> <li>• Reinforce desirable behaviors</li> <li>• Build calming or high-interest activity into schedule</li> </ul>

## Student Strengths

- Determined
- Creative
- Loving
- Curious
- Bright
- Careful
- Diligent
- Busy
- Clever
- Complex
- Excited
- Funny
- Visual learner

## References

- <sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5)*. Washington, DC: Author.
- <sup>2</sup> Christensen, D. L., Baio, J., Van Naarden Braun, K., Bilder, D., Charles, J., Constantino, J. N. ... Yeargin-Allsopp, M. (2016). Prevalence and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years – autism and developmental disabilities monitoring network, 11 sites, United States, 2012. *Surveillance Summaries*, 65(3), 1-23. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6503a1>
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## Resources

- **Centers for Disease and Control & Preventions**  
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>
- **National Institute of Mental Health**  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>
- **Autism Speaks**  
[www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)
- **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association**  
<http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Autism/>
- **Do 2 Learn**  
[http://www.do2learn.com/disabilities/CharacteristicsAndStrategies/AutismSpectrumDisorder\\_Strategies.html](http://www.do2learn.com/disabilities/CharacteristicsAndStrategies/AutismSpectrumDisorder_Strategies.html)
- **The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder**  
<http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>