

Understanding an Autism Diagnosis

A guide for parents and carers · Child Psychiatry Consultancy Ltd

This guide has been written to help families understand what an autism diagnosis means for their child. It is for general information only and is not a substitute for clinical advice. If you have questions about your child's diagnosis, please contact us.

What does the diagnosis mean?

An autism diagnosis means that your child has been assessed by a multidisciplinary team and found to meet the clinical criteria for Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC). Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition — a different way of experiencing and interacting with the world. It is not an illness, a failing, or something that needs to be cured.

For many families, a diagnosis brings profound relief — particularly if the journey to diagnosis has been long. It opens the door to understanding, acceptance, and the right support.

What autism is — and what it isn't

Autism is caused by differences in how the brain is structured and how it works. It is not caused by parenting, vaccines, diet, or anything a family has done. It runs strongly in families.

- Autism is a spectrum — it presents very differently from one person to the next
- Autism is not a sign of low intelligence — many autistic people are highly intelligent
- Autism is not a phase — it is a lifelong condition, though needs and presentation change with age and support
- Autism often co-exists with other conditions — ADHD, anxiety, dyslexia, and sensory processing difficulties are common
- Autistic people have many strengths — attention to detail, deep focus, honesty, creativity, and loyalty are common

What the diagnosis covers

Autism is characterised by differences in two main areas:

Social communication and interaction

Differences in how a person communicates, makes and keeps friendships, understands social rules, and interprets other people's intentions and emotions.

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests

Intense interests, insistence on routines and sameness, repetitive movements (stimming), and sensory differences — being over- or under-sensitive to sounds, touch, light, taste, or smell.

Understanding sensory differences

Many autistic children experience the world more intensely than others — sounds may be overwhelming, textures unbearable, or lights too bright. Others may seek out sensory input — spinning, crashing, strong flavours, tight pressure. Understanding your child's sensory profile is an important part of supporting them well.

What happens next?

- Share the diagnostic report with your child's school — ask the SENCO what support can be put in place
- Request reasonable adjustments — quiet spaces, advance notice of change, visual schedules, movement breaks
- Consider whether an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) is appropriate — our report can support an application
- Look into support organisations: National Autistic Society (autism.org.uk), Ambitious about Autism, Autistic Girls Network
- Consider whether therapy may help — occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, or CBT for anxiety
- Connect with other families — many parents find peer support invaluable

Understanding masking

Many autistic children — particularly girls — learn to mask their autism in public by copying neurotypical behaviour. This takes enormous energy and can lead to meltdowns at home after a day of holding things together. If your child seems fine at school but falls apart at home, masking may explain this.

Over time, masking can lead to autistic burnout — a state of exhaustion where a child can no longer maintain their usual functioning. If you think your child may be experiencing burnout, please contact us.

Telling your child about their diagnosis

Most autistic children feel relieved when they understand their diagnosis. It explains experiences they may have found confusing or distressing. Be honest, positive, and frame the diagnosis as an explanation — not a limitation.

- Focus on what autism means for them specifically — not a general description
- Emphasise strengths alongside challenges
- Use age-appropriate language — younger children need simpler explanations
- Let them lead — some children want to know everything; others need time
- Books for autistic children can be a helpful way to introduce the diagnosis

Practical strategies at home

- Keep routines predictable and give advance notice of changes
- Use visual supports — timetables, countdown timers, social stories
- Understand and respect sensory sensitivities — reduce or avoid triggers where possible
- Allow time to decompress after school — the school day is often exhausting for autistic children
- Follow their interests and use them as a bridge to connection and learning
- Learn to recognise early signs of overwhelm before a meltdown occurs
- Celebrate their unique qualities and strengths every day