

FACT SHEET

Supporting children with Autism



What is Autism?

According to Kanner (1943), 1943 Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that children are born with, which means they have an inability to form the usual biological connection with people. In clinical settings, the formal diagnosis is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); however, within education and care settings, many people and organisations now prefer the term autism or on the autism spectrum, as it is more strengths-based and respectful.

Diagnosis is no longer seen as a single spectrum running from 'mild to severe'. Instead, children are described in terms of categories of support needs (for example, social communication, behaviour, flexibility, and sensory processing), which can vary in intensity from child to child. This approach recognises that autism presents differently in every child.

Another growing concept is AuADHD, a co-occurrence of both autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Many children experience features of both, and recognising this overlap ensures that their learning and wellbeing supports are better tailored.

Key Characteristics:

Children with autism may experience the world differently from their peers. Characteristics vary for each child, but may include:

- **Social differences:** Difficulty with social interactions, understanding emotions, playing with peers or making eye contact.
- **Communication differences:** May have delayed speech, use language in unusual ways (e.g. echolalia), prefer nonverbal communication, or take things literally.
- **Repetitive behaviours:** Repeating actions (e.g. hand flapping-lining up toys), following set routines, or having intense interests in specific topics.
- **Sensory sensitivities:** May be overly sensitive or under-sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or smells. May also seek sensory input.
- **Flexibility and routines:** Can find it difficult to adjust to changes, transitions, or unexpected events.
- **Emotional regulation:** May have strong emotional responses, including loss of emotional control or shutdowns when overwhelmed.

Understanding the Autism Diagnosis Process: Autism is diagnosed by a multidisciplinary team including a paediatrician, psychologist, speech pathologist, and occupational therapist. Assessment usually involves family interviews, observations, and developmental history. Early diagnosis and intervention can make a positive difference in skill development and participation.

Information brought to you by **OTCS FISH team**

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Support Strategies:

Aspect's phrase "*A Different Brilliant*" beautifully emphasises the unique strengths, perspectives, and abilities of individuals with autism, rather than focusing solely on challenges or deficits.

Educators may observe differences in the way children with autism play, communicate, and interact with their peers. To support children effectively, here are some strategies:

- **Use predictable routines and visual supports:** picture timetables, first and then boards, transition warnings.
- **Adapt communication:** use clear, simple language, gestures, and visuals, and allow extra time to respond.
- **Support sensory needs:** offer quiet zones, noise-reducing headphones, weighted toys, or fidget tools.
- **Provide structured small group activities:** role-model turn-taking, sharing, and communication skills.
- **Follow the child's interests:** link learning to topics/activities the child enjoys, to boost engagement.
- **Break tasks into smaller steps:** scaffold with demonstrations and praise for attempts and achievements.
- **Foster peer understanding:** buddy systems, social stories and modelling inclusion.
- **Work in partnership:** with families and allied health professionals to ensure consistent strategies across settings.

Children with ASD can often possess a unique range of skills:

- Strong memory for facts and visual information.
- Creativity and innovative problem-solving.
- Deep focus on areas of interest.
- Honesty and reliability.
- Different ways of thinking that can enrich group learning.

Links to NQS:

Quality Area 1 Educational Program and Practice:

1.1.2: Each child's current knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program. Recognising a child's support categories ensures learning is built around their strengths and interests.

Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

6.2.1: Continuity of learning and transitions. Working with families and health professionals ensures consistent strategies across settings.

Further Support:

If families or educators are concerned, encourage them to seek advice from a GP, Child Health Nurse, or Paediatrician. Referral to specialists such as a speech pathologist, occupational therapist, or psychologist may be recommended.

- Raising Children Network – www.raisingchildren.net.au
- Early Childhood Australia – www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au
- ACECQA Inclusion Resources – www.acecqa.gov.au
- Aspect – Autism Spectrum Australia – www.aspect.org.au
- Leo Kanner – <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29667863/>

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