



# Understanding Autism: A Guide for Families

## What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder that includes differences and/or challenges in social communication and interaction, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors.

## How do you receive this diagnosis?

The criteria for a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (also referred to as ASD) includes challenges in social-emotional reciprocity (such as back and forth conversation), delayed verbal and/or nonverbal communication skills such as eye contact or body language (such as gestures). The individual could have difficulty initiating or maintaining social relationships that would be expected for their age. Often individuals on the autism spectrum have difficulty with changes in routines, engage in repetitive patterns of behavior or play and may be very sensitive to sensory input (for example smell, sound, touch, and taste). Although many may think that individuals on the autism spectrum do not have the ability to feel emotion or desire to make connections with others, that is not the case. Their difficulty is in expressing themselves appropriately. All of these issues can be characteristics and can be a sign of an autism spectrum disorder.

An autism spectrum disorder diagnosis requires a full psychological assessment that includes how the individual learns, an autism screening tool, and a school or community observation. This is necessary as some of the indicators of autism could also be indicators of other conditions. Autism is not considered a mental health diagnosis, however the issues facing an individual with autism can cause depression and anxiety. It is important to access the appropriate support and/or therapy to address these issues.

## How do you manage this diagnosis?

Treatment for autism spectrum disorder is based on areas of need. Often speech therapy, occupational therapy (sensory integration) and behavioral therapy are recommended. These therapies can be accessed at various ages. Research indicates that early intervention yields positive results and builds a strong foundation for growth and development.

Supports and services for adults are based on their functional skills and ability to live independently. Services can include support for independent living, vocational training, behavioral therapy, and general skill development.

Autism spectrum disorder is not necessarily related to intellectual disabilities. Each individual has their own abilities and needs. Many children attend regular classes in school, however most require an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to ensure that they receive the necessary supports and treatments that school districts and charter schools are mandated to provide.



## RESOURCES

### **Autism Society of America**

autism-society.org  
(888) 3AUTISM

### **Autism Society of Los Angeles**

autismla.org  
(562) 804-5556

### **Autism Speaks**

autismspeaks.org  
(888) AUTISM2

### **Public School Districts**

[www.sce.ca.gov/sd](http://www.sce.ca.gov/sd)

### **National Alliance for Public Charter Schools**

[publiccharters.org](http://publiccharters.org)

### **Disability Rights California**

[disabilityrightsca.org](http://disabilityrightsca.org)  
(800) 766-5746

For additional information, you may also contact  
WRC's Staff Psychologist Kaely Shilakes, Psy.D  
who can be reached at (310) 258-4157.



**WESTSIDE**  
REGIONAL CENTER

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[www.westsiderc.org](http://www.westsiderc.org) / (310) 258-4000