

# Early Signs of Autism Every Parent Could Observe

Below are the signs that parents of children aged 1-3 years can use to understand when it's necessary to consult specialists regarding autism diagnosis.

✓ Just a few signs from the list below are enough to warrant a consultation with a specialist. The child doesn't have to demonstrate all of them, as autism is a spectrum, and each individual has their own set of characteristics.

✓ If your child consistently displayed certain behaviors before but has stopped now, that also counts as a characteristic of them.

✓ Observe your child in different places and with different people.

✓ Try to be critical when observing your child's behavior.

✚ **Speech Delay:** If a child says the word 'mama' but doesn't use it to call you by 1.5 years, and instead just occasionally vocalizes the sound combination, or if the child doesn't speak at least 10 words by eighteen months and a few short sentences by two years, it is a reason to consult specialists. It may not necessarily be a speech problem but rather a communication issue; the child simply may not feel the need to communicate with you to the extent a neurotypical child does.

✚ **Lack of Shared Attention:** A neurotypical child typically becomes interested in what interests an adult. During playtime, shift your enthusiastic gaze towards an object or toy. Beforehand, ask another adult to observe the child's response: Did the child meet your gaze, notice your interest in something, or continue with their activity?

✚ **Engagement with Surroundings:** The child should be fully present with you in the moment. For example, if a box falls nearby with a loud noise, they should look towards the source of the sound and then at you to ensure you also noticed it. Their actions and behavior should demonstrate their awareness of their surroundings. For example, a child with developmental delay might allow to be dressed and placed in a stroller but remain a passive observer rather than an active participant in life.

✚ **Neurotypical children typically make eye contact regularly during interactions.** They often shift their gaze from a toy to their mother, catch her gaze, and respond with eye contact. In contrast, a child with autism may make less frequent eye contact; their gaze might slide across faces or divert elsewhere, such as behind your back. Regardless, you will notice if a child avoids making eye contact.

✚ **Seeking Approval:** A neurotypical child seeks your reaction with their gaze. They might place a puzzle piece correctly and then look at their mother, repeating this action to gauge her response. They often want to express, 'Look what I can do!' In contrast, a child with autism might spend 10 minutes naming countries by memory without glancing at you, as they are not seeking your approval.

✚ **Lack of Sharing Joy:** A neurotypical child will often bring a toy car found in the sandbox to their mother or a flower from the lawn, sharing their joy in discovery. When visiting friends, they eagerly rummage through toy boxes and frequently glance back at you, excitedly showing their findings. In contrast, a child with autism may not feel compelled to share their joy with others; they may prefer to play alone.

✦ Does Not Respond with 'Yes' and 'No': By around one year old, children can typically communicate their needs using gestures, nods, or head shakes, if not yet with words. If you find yourself guessing whether the child wants something, this could be a potential red flag.

✦ Special Abilities and Interests: Children with autism do not necessarily lag in intellectual development. Often, they demonstrate exceptional abilities in self-teaching alphabets, numbers, and colors, which can be misleading—such a bright child might not appear to have any difficulties. However, intellect alone does not rule out autism, and if a child learns to read before speaking, it could indicate hyperlexia—a clear signal to seek professional guidance.

✦ Does Not Pay Attention to People: When a neurotypical child enters a new room or encounters a new situation, they typically observe the faces of those present, even if shyly while clinging to their mother. In contrast, a child with autism may glance briefly at faces or not pay attention to them at all, instead heading straight for toys, doors, or other objects.

✦ Increased Interest in Non-play Objects: A child with autism may ignore toys altogether or show minimal interest in them. Instead, they might spend hours opening and closing doors, cabinets, turning lights on and off, pressing buttons, observing fans, or engaging in other repetitive actions.

✦ Incorrect Toy Play: Even after multiple explanations of how to play correctly, a child with autism may continue to play with toys according to their own scenario—such as repeatedly hitting a ball against skittles, tapping a toy car on a table, or endlessly opening doors of a toy house and placing puzzle pieces inside. Attempts to interrupt or distract them may lead to a meltdown.

✦ Does Not Respond to Their Name: Typically, a child will turn towards the person calling their name by around 9 months old. If by one year of age the child does not respond to their name or nickname at least 9 times out of 10, this could be a red flag. Sometimes parents excuse this behavior as the child 'being busy.' However, if you call the child's name followed by 'cartoon!' or 'take a candy!' they may respond eagerly because they see a benefit and want to obtain it. Yet, mere interaction with you may not hold their interest, hence they may not respond to their name alone.

✦ Desire for Consistency: A child with autism may seek consistency in their surroundings. They might insist on eating from a specific plate, sitting in a particular chair, arranging blocks in a precise order, or playing games according to their own rules. Any deviation, such as someone rearranging the blocks differently, could lead to a meltdown. If a child suddenly starts crying for no apparent reason, consider analyzing the situation; perhaps you put on their shoes before their hat, whereas you usually do it the other way around.

✦ Insistence on Routes: Similar to the previous point, a child with autism may insist on walking the exact same route each time. If you need to deviate from this routine, such as returning home to retrieve something forgotten, it could trigger a meltdown. For instance, rather than turning back directly, you may need to navigate around a building and then return. The child might also prefer walking on a specific side of the street, and being on the opposite side could similarly lead to a meltdown.

✦ Lining Up Objects: Children with autism often line up objects or toys, which may not be considered playing as it lacks meaningful interaction. For instance, if a child lines up toys and pretends they are a train chugging along, this can be typical imaginative play. However, if objects are simply lined up on the floor or bed in a specific sequence, especially if they appear to lack purpose or interaction, this could be a potential red flag.

✦ **Clothing Sensitivity:** Children with autism may refuse to wear certain clothes due to unpleasant tactile sensations. They might be bothered by clothing labels, rough patches, or tight-fitting garments. Conversely, they may also be attracted to clothing labels and find comfort in holding them.

✦ **Resistance to New Things:** Children with autism often resist anything new. They may ignore new toys, find it challenging to switch from winter to summer clothing or struggle with wearing brand-new clothes altogether. For instance, parents might need to wash new clothes and hang them up with old ones, pretending they've always been there, just to coax the child into wearing something new.

✦ **Stereotyped Movements:** Children with autism often exhibit stims—repetitive movements they engage in during sensory overload. These may include snapping fingers, waving hands near their face, clicking their tongue, jumping, or flapping their hands like wings.

✦ **Echolalia:** This behavior typically manifests in slightly older children, beyond one year of age—persistent repetition of phrases. These phrases often come from cartoons or commercials and are frequently uttered out of context. Children may also repeat questions as their answers.

✦ **Fears:** Children with autism often have unusual fears, occasionally leading to extreme reactions. For instance, they may fear closing doors, street grills with shawarma, balloons, or darkness. However, if a child only exhibits fears without any other signs listed, it might indicate a separate issue.

✦ **Communication Difficulties:** Communication is a primary indicator of autism, but it can be challenging for parents to assess in early childhood. Effective communication should resemble a game of ping-pong—you toss the ball, and it's thrown back to you. If you're not receiving these 'balls,' it's a red flag.

✦ **Difficulty Interacting with Other Children:** At an early age, it's normal for children not to engage in joint play with others, but by around age 3, they typically start playing together. A child with autism might play near other children but not actively with them. They may even show open fear of other children and refuse to go to the playground if other kids are present. However, they may react calmly to interactions with older or younger children.

✦ **Lack of Pretend Play:** Typically, children, even at a young age, enthusiastically engage in pretend play such as playing house, cars, or with dolls—feeding them and putting them to sleep. As they develop, their pretend play becomes more complex, involving roles like animals, firefighters, doctors, or playing family. If a child lacks such symbolic and pretend play, it may indicate a developmental concern.

✦ **Selective Eating:** Many autistic individuals exhibit specific food behaviors. For instance, a child may eat only a very limited range of foods, tolerate only one texture or color, or eat apples only when sliced, not in chunks. These preferences or aversions could be associated with autism. For example, they might refuse multi-component dishes or dislike foods with dots like sesame seeds, spices, or berry pieces in yogurt.

✦ **Eating Behavior:** Children with autism often exhibit specific eating behaviors, such as eating foods one by one without mixing them on the plate. They may insist that different foods on the plate do not touch each other.

✦ **Regression:** Autism may involve periods where a child abruptly stops doing something they previously did. For instance, they might have been saying words but stopped by age 2, or they may have been eating a variety of foods but suddenly restrict themselves to only three items.

✦ **Excessive Contact:** Surprisingly, this can also be a red flag. If a child insists on hugging other kids on the playground or, in older age, tells random adults about the game they played on their phone today, it's not genuine sociability but rather a misunderstanding of social interactions.

✦ **Fixation on Familiar:** Children with autism may exhibit fixations on familiar routines and orderliness, such as repeatedly closing doors and windows or tidying up drawers.

✦ **Gestures:** Children with autism often use gestures sparingly. Common non-verbal communications like 'come here,' 'stop,' 'more,' 'sit here,' 'yes,' and 'no' may be underutilized. When they do begin using gestures, they often require teaching and training.

✦ **Pointing Gesture:** Children with autism often exhibit limited or absent pointing gestures. Typically, by one year old, neurotypical children point to something of interest in the distance for their parents. A child with autism may not engage in this behavior. Closer to 2-3 years old, they might point to objects in a book but are less likely to point to things in the distance. The natural development of pointing gestures in typical children contrasts with the need for teaching and practice in children with autism. For example, they may benefit from learning through interactive apps, such as popping bubbles.

✦ **Pointing Gesture Response:** A typical child starts following your finger from around 5-6 months old when you show them something. They not only look at the tip of your finger but also at the object you're pointing to. In contrast, a child with autism may show little to no interest in what you're pointing out to them.

✦ **Using Your Hand as a Tool:** This is a distinct signal. A typically developing child has various ways to communicate their needs to adults. For instance, they might point at an object and then at an adult, indicating 'you, give me that water bottle.' In contrast, an autistic child might grab an adult's hand and direct it towards what they want—such as a shelf with toys or a closed cupboard.

✦ **Not Noticing Surroundings:** Typically, children start noticing pets like dogs or cats at home from around 6 months old. However, a child with autism may not pay attention to them. If you ask a child with autism to show you the dog at home, or even mom or dad, they may ignore the request and fail to react about 90% of the time.

✦ **Response to Requests:** By 1.5 years old, a typical child understands and willingly follows even two-level requests, such as 'put these pants in the basket and bring me new ones from the closet.' In contrast, a child with autism often ignores requests that do not align with their interests. For instance, they may readily comply with requests like 'solve the puzzle' or 'sort by colors,' but they may not engage in household-related tasks.

✦ **Finger Plays and 'Patty Cake':** Typically, children enjoy playing games like 'This Little Piggy' and other finger games around 9 months old. However, a child with autism often shows no interest in these activities. They may not clap their hands or allow others to engage their hands in play. While they might tolerate these activities briefly, there is typically no joy or pleasure evident on their face. Such interactions simply do not capture their interest.

✦ **Lack of Imitation:** Typically, by one year old, a child begins imitating movements of their mother or other children, whether on TV or nearby. If you show them a dance, they will often try to mimic it to the best of their ability. In contrast, a child with autism may not imitate other people's movements at an early age, or they may do so limitedly.

✦ **Does not adhere to social norms:** Typically, by 1.5 years of age or earlier, a typical child learns gestures like 'hello' and 'bye' and uses them appropriately. If a child does not wave to those arriving or leaving, does not say 'hello,' 'bye,' or 'goodnight' (even if in a distorted manner), it may indicate a developmental concern.

✦ **Indifference to the appearance and departure of parents:** By the age of one, a typical child usually cries when the mother leaves a room, leaving them alone (for instance, in a doctor's office). If a child does not react to such departures, it's a red flag. Around 1.5 years old, a typical child is usually incredibly happy when parents come home, jumping up at the sound of keys and joyfully running to meet them, shouting "Mom! Dad!" In contrast, a child with autism typically ignores the arrival of parents, continuing with their own activities.

✦ **It's highly likely that a child affected by ASD won't ask questions, let alone ones like 'why.'** They often already know what they need to, and the rest may appear as if they aren't concerned.

✦ **At around 10 months old, typically developing children often reach their hands upwards when their parents are about to pick them up.** In contrast, a child with autism may allow themselves to be picked up but does not extend their hands outward.

✦ **Social Smile:** By 6 months of age, typically developing children should smile back in response to adults, as it's a crucial form of nonverbal communication. If a child does not respond to smiles before their first birthday, it could be a potential red flag. However, later on, they may learn to respond with a smile, which could alleviate concerns.

✦ **Tactile Contact:** Many children with autism dislike physical touch, often withdrawing and not allowing themselves to be hugged or kissed. However, some may exhibit the opposite behavior, being overly tactile, constantly and persistently seeking physical contact.

✦ **Fear of Loud Sounds:** Children with autism often struggle to tolerate loud noises such as vacuum cleaners, drills, hairdryers, and children's screams. As they grow older, they may frequently cover their ears with their hands, which can be a significant indicator.

✦ **Gaze:** The gaze of children with autism is often deep and penetrating, unlike that of typical children. It tends to be inward-directed and can give the impression of seeing through adults. Parents may struggle to discern the difference between their child's gaze and that of a neurotypical child.

✦ **Stories:** A child with autism may enjoy looking at picture books or encyclopedias, but they are unlikely to be interested in listening to stories where characters engage in dialogue and actions. These social nuances are typically not of interest to them.

✦ **Objects in Hand:** Children with autism often hold non-play items or toys in their hands; they may carry around a pebble, stick, or small bag everywhere, gripping onto something. It reflects a common behavior observed among



children on the autism spectrum, where they may find comfort or sensory satisfaction in holding specific objects, even if these items are not traditionally considered toys.

✦ **Controlling Behavior:** Children with autism often display a tendency to direct others on how to behave, whether it's indicating where to sit, taking books to "read" themselves, or insisting on turning off music or TV. While adults may find this behavior endearing, likening it to being a "little boss," it also reflects a fixation characteristic. For example, they may insist on being the first to do everything—from getting dressed to leaving the house or walking down the road. If someone surpasses them or completes a task more quickly, it can trigger a tantrum.

✦ **Compassion** typically begins to emerge in children between one and a half to two years old. When they see a crying character on TV, they might instinctively try to wipe away its tears. In a real-life scenario where a mother expresses pain and tears, a typically developing child will often respond by comforting her. In contrast, a child with autism might not react or may become upset themselves due to the emotional display.

✦ **"Easy" child:** Children with high-functioning autism often exhibit an 'easy' temperament—they can entertain themselves for extended periods, don't frequently seek their mother's attention, and aren't demanding. For example, you might place a child with autism on the floor for a nap, and upon waking, find them still happily engrossed in their toys. While this behavior can be characteristic, it's important to note that if a child consistently shows no need for interaction or support, it could signal a developmental concern.

✦ **Lack of understanding of danger:** Understanding danger typically begins when children start crawling, a crucial milestone for their safety. A neurotypical child might learn to fear heights early on, potentially experiencing a small fall from a sofa while playing. In contrast, a child with autism often lacks this awareness of danger. They may climb high slides without hesitation, unaware of the risk of falling unless closely supervised by parents. On playgrounds, they might run away from their parents without looking back, or even calmly approach roads and cars without fear. It's not until later, typically after age 3, that they begin to grasp these dangers. Until then, it's advisable to keep them securely in a stroller or hold their hand closely to ensure their safety.

✦ **High pain threshold:** Many children with autism have a high pain threshold; they may not cry out or show distress even after bumping into something hard or walking barefoot on hot pavement. When observed alongside other signs, this can be a significant red flag.

✦ **Lack of initiative:** A child with autism may bring an object to their mother to meet their needs—like opening a juice bottle or unzipping a bag—that they cannot do independently. However, they often do not initiate communication themselves, such as approaching just for companionship, inviting someone to play with a toy, or bringing a book to be read to them. They may not naturally see the value in social interaction. Nevertheless, if parents initiate interaction, they may participate, such as agreeing to play.

✦ **Failure to transfer knowledge from books to life:** A typical 1.5-year-old child eagerly points out real cars after seeing them in a book, or excitedly finds a dog in their home that matches the one they saw in a book or on a screen. In contrast, a child with autism may be surrounded by the same objects they see in books, or even shown a slideshow of items from their own home, without feeling inclined to make these connections known.

✦ **Special interests:** Children with autism often develop intense interests that border on obsession—such as cars, dinosaurs, elevators, colors, or numbers. Early on, parents may struggle to differentiate between a typical childhood fascination and an autistic fixation. However, for a child with autism, their focus on these themes can be extreme. As

they grow older, they may exclusively discuss their interest, regardless of others' engagement or whether their conversation partner shares their passion.

One common manifestation is hyperlexia, where the child shows an early ability to read beyond their developmental age. A hyperlexic child might decorate a drawn Christmas tree with letters instead of toys, or compulsively write sequences of numbers without context. They may also perceive letters everywhere, identifying them in car logos or flags.

✦ Decision-making difficulties: Children with autism often face challenges when making decisions, as they may find it difficult to make a conscious choice. When you present yogurt to a neurotypical child, there's a process of brain activity—they evaluate each option and eventually decide, saying, 'I want this one!' In contrast, a neurodiverse child might simply grab the first thing they see or ignore the choice altogether.

✦ Sleep problems: This can occur independently of autism, but it is frequently associated with children on the spectrum, who often struggle to fall asleep and experience restless, limited sleep. For instance, during the early years of a child with autism, they may require constant rocking to fall asleep, sometimes not drifting off until 2-3 a.m. They might resist going to bed, have tantrums, or require one parent to stay with them all night while the other sleeps. Exhausted, the child might occasionally fall asleep on the floor or during a nighttime stroll. Even when successfully put to bed, they may wake up as early as 4-5 a.m.

✦ Photography: Children with autism older than 2 years are unlikely to want to be photographed. While it's possible to direct their gaze towards the camera lens during early childhood, as they grow older, it becomes more challenging, resulting in most photographs showing them looking away from the camera.

✦ Self-care problems: Unless there's exceptional persistence from a caregiver, children with autism often experience delays in learning to use utensils for eating, achieving potty training, and mastering tasks like washing, dressing, and undressing. These developmental milestones typically take longer for them to accomplish compared to their peers.

✦ Emotional roller coaster: Parents of an undiagnosed child often find themselves oscillating between feelings of "Why do other children do this, but mine doesn't? What's wrong with him?" and relief when their child unexpectedly performs a task correctly or learns a long-awaited new skill, briefly believing their child is just like any other. If you're experiencing this uncertainty, avoid prolonging it with thoughts like, "Could it be autism? No, it can't be." Instead, seek guidance from a qualified specialist to obtain a clear understanding.