



# Autism Spectrum

---

Information Leaflet







## + Introduction

**You may have heard the term Autism Spectrum (AS) beforehand if you are reading this leaflet then you may be wondering if you, or a child or young person that you care for is autistic.**

This leaflet has been designed to give you some basic information about autism in order to help you decide whether or not to go ahead with an assessment that could lead to a diagnosis.

There is also lots of useful information online. We recommend the websites of:

### **The National Autistic Society**

[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

### **The NHS**

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism)

<https://notanautismmom.com>

This leaflet was designed and written by professionals who provide assessment, diagnosis and support for autistic children and adolescents. Although the content of this leaflet is aimed primarily at parents and carers, it should also be of interest to people who suspect that they may be autistic and those who take an interest in or work with individual who are affected by autism.

# + What is Autism Spectrum?

**Autism Spectrum is a developmental disability, which means it is present in childhood and is expected to remain present throughout life. According to the World Health Organization, it affects around 1 in every 100 people worldwide.**

Autism affects the way that a person relates to and communicates with others and the environment. The term spectrum implies that the condition varies in presentation depending on the individual. This means that some traits may appear more apparent than others. The person may have more subtle differences in their social relationships and interaction that can be masked. Others may have higher overall support needs, particularly if they have additional co-occurring conditions such as learning disabilities. Early intervention can ensure that the right support is in place to support wellbeing so that children and young people can flourish.

Autism is often diagnosed during a child's pre-school or early school years, but can be diagnosed at any age. People whose differences appear, outwardly, to be more subtle, might not receive a diagnosis until their teenage years or later, when increasing social demands make these more apparent.



**Diagnosis is based on symptoms which professionals may refer to as a 'dyad of impairment'. This means there are two areas that together form the basis of a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum, although other traits can also form part of their presentation.**

## **1. Social Communication and Social Interaction**

Differences in this area may be apparent in:

- the use of non-verbal communication strategies, such as eye-contact or facial expressions
- difficulties making and/or keeping friends
- Autistic people often have difficulties understanding the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of others
- Non-autistic people may have difficulties understanding autistic people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
- differences in their understanding and regulating of emotions

For any of us, it can be frustrating and anxiety provoking if we do not fully understand what is happening around us, including why people are behaving the way that they are, or what people mean when they are speaking. It is also very difficult not to feel understood. This frustration and anxiety can sometimes be communicated through behaviour.

## **2. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests, which could include differences in sensory reactivity**

Differences in this area may include:

- attention differences such as intense focus on a small range of interests, or in topics which can sometimes seem unusual to most other people

- preferring things to be done a certain way and preferring routines rather than new ways of doing things

It is estimated that 60 to 70 per cent of autistic children present with sensory modulation/processing disorder. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to people who are not autistic.

There is a continuum of sensory perceptual differences for autistic people. Some sensory experiences, such as loud noises or certain textures, can be experienced as unpleasant by the individual and this may be apparent in the person's behaviour, e.g. covering their ears with their hands or refusing to eat certain foods.

Other people may really enjoy certain sensations and seek more of them. Sometimes, sensory seeking behaviours can be classified as challenging or distressing for the person and for people around them, particularly if they put them at risk of injuring themselves or others.

There are significant variations among autistic people, both in their abilities and the challenges they may face, meaning different people need different levels of support. Their abilities and support needs evolve over time. The range of intellectual capability is as varied as in the general population, ranging from those with profound learning disabilities to individuals with high intellectual capacity. With the right type of support, all can be helped to live a fulfilling life of their own choosing.

# + Positive Traits of Autism Spectrum

There is a tendency to focus on the support needs associated with autism and use words like impairment, disorder, disability and difficulties. However, many autistic people have positive traits and talents that should be highlighted and celebrated.

Positive characteristics can include:

*Trustworthiness*

*Reliability*

*Honesty*

*Dependability*

*Being genuine*

*Accuracy*

*Having a good work ethic*

*The ability to observe details that others may miss*

*A good memory*

*Conscientiousness*

*An enjoyment of routine and repetition*


*Being hardworking*

*Dedication*

*Punctuality*

*Being unlikely to manipulate or to discriminate against others*

*Being forthright and having a strong sense of justice*



Often people feel that being autistic is a fundamental and important aspect of their identity.

# + What Causes Autism Spectrum?

**Although a lot of research is going on in this area, to date, no study has identified a single biological cause for autism, although there is very strong evidence for a predominantly genetic cause.**

There is no single gene or single hormonal explanation for autism, nor is there one area of the brain where autism resides. It is widely accepted that multiple pre-natal factors combine to influence the development, structure and functioning of the brain, eventually leading to the pattern of behavioural and psychological symptoms consistent with a clinical diagnosis of AS.



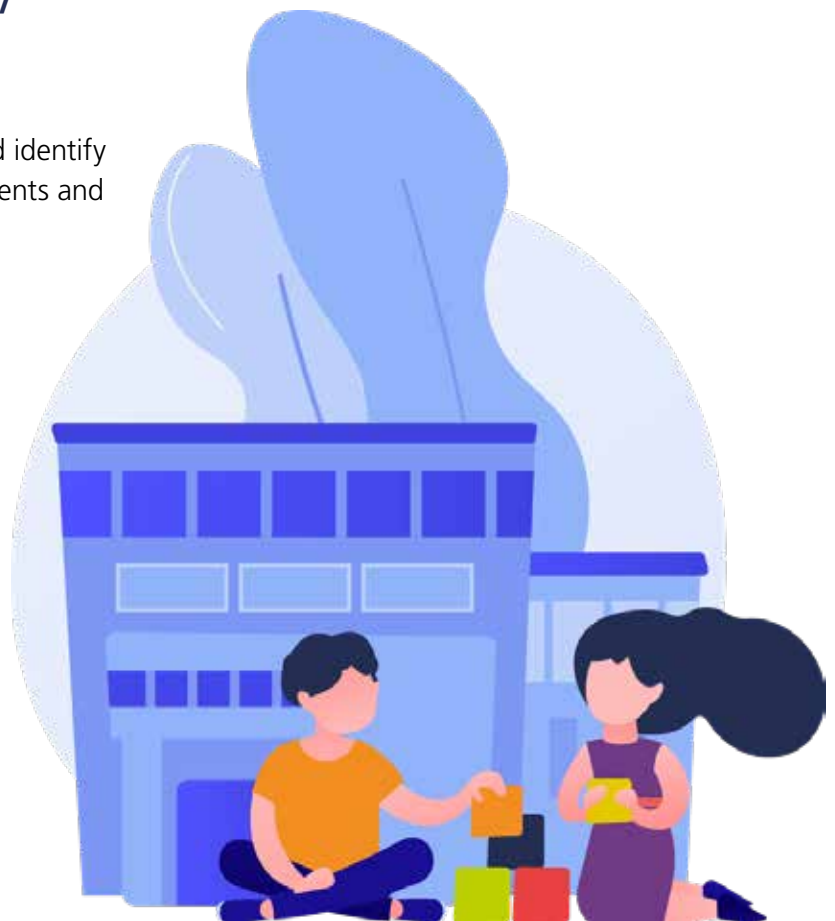
# + The Assessment Process

**A group of professionals, known as the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT), meets regularly to discuss the needs of children and young people requesting AS assessment. They request information, undertake assessments and discuss the results. The group consists of professionals from Child Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy and a Paediatrician/ Psychiatrist.**

The MDT aims to promote joint working and identify lead professionals to complete joint assessments and family support plans.

In order to decide whether a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum is appropriate or not, the MDT will need to gather a variety of information relating to language, cognitive, social and emotional development. The MDT will gather information from a variety of sources, including parents and carers, education and the child or young person themselves.

It is important to check that any features that may look like autism are not actually a result of some other health condition, so wider assessments of physical and mental health may be undertaken.





# + Getting A Diagnosis – Some Things To Consider

**The decision to undertake an assessment for AS is an important and highly individual one. Here are some things that you may wish to consider before engaging with the process. If you have any queries, a member of the MDT team will be happy to answer any questions.**

People often say that having had a diagnosis helps them to better understand themselves, or the young person that they care for.

It can help you and the people around you to understand the types of support that might be helpful.

There are several groups locally for parents and carers offering support. You can find information about these on the Supported Needs and Disability Office's website:

[www.disability.gov.gi](http://www.disability.gov.gi)

Sometimes a diagnosis may be used as a reason for exclusion – for example, the UK military do not currently accept people with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum though they are considering changing this as there is increasing understanding that people with AS can have exactly the skill set and personal characteristics that are useful in some areas of the military.



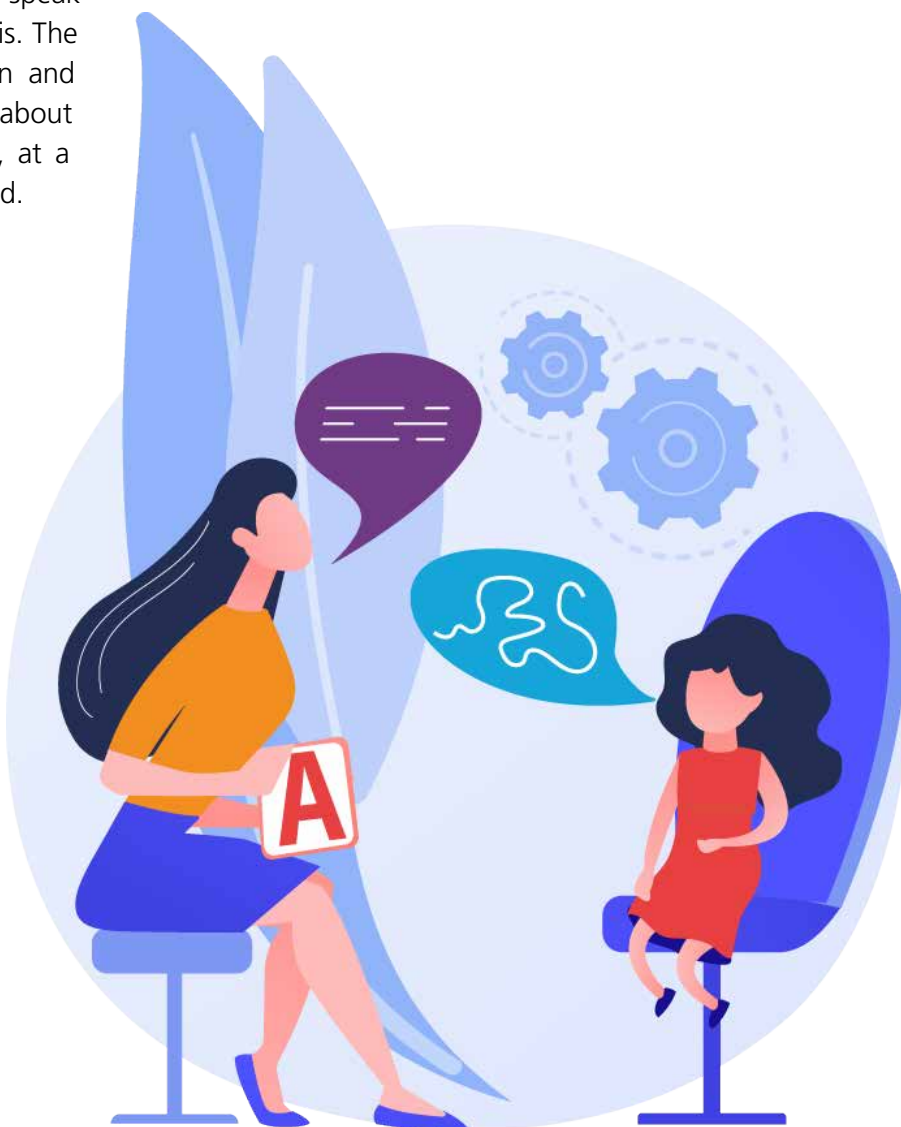
# + Talking To Your Child About Autism Spectrum

**Parents often worry about whether they should talk to their child about being autistic. They wonder when would be a good time and how to approach the subject.**

A great deal depends on personal circumstances and you may wish to speak to healthcare professionals about this. The consensus is generally that children and young people are entitled to know about their diagnosis as early as possible, at a level that they are able to understand.

The National Autistic Society ([www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)) and the NHS ([www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism)) both contain useful information and tips to help with your conversations.

If the decision is made to progress with an assessment, then the MDT asks that all young people 12-years-old and over sign a consent form, as well as their parent or carer.



# + Contact Us

**For further information, please contact your GP or medical professional.**

This information leaflet is produced by the:

- Occupational Therapy Team
- Speech and Language Therapy Team
- Physiotherapy Team
- Consultant Paediatricians
- Clinical Psychology Team

You can also contact the Supported Needs & Disability

Office on:

[sendoffice@gibraltar.gov.gi](mailto:sendoffice@gibraltar.gov.gi)

