

Autism Spectrum Disorder

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES



What is autism spectrum disorder?

Autism and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are general terms for a group of complex neurodevelopmental conditions. The diagnostic classification system (DSM-5, May 2013) combines the previous subcategories of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) into the one category of ASD.

ASD is present early in life and medically characterized by varying degrees of skill development in:

- Communication/language
- Social abilities
- Restricted/unusual patterns of activities and interests

The characteristics of ASD can be present in different combinations and at different levels of ability. Often specific behaviors vary widely from person to person. ASD occurs in as many as 1 in 31 children, is about four times more common in boys than in girls, and occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups.

What causes ASD?

The specific causes are not yet known, although there is consensus that genetic vulnerability and unidentified environmental factors cause atypical brain development related to core features. While scientists are looking into possible environmental origins, there is no current established scientific link to proposed causes such as vaccines, diet, or toxin/environmental exposure.

How can I tell if a child has autism?

There are at present no medical or genetic tests specific to ASD. Diagnosis is determined by assessing and observing a child's behavior. No two children with autism are alike, but some features may be identifiable as early as 18 months, or even sooner. Early indicators include delayed language, deficits in nonverbal communication (e.g., pointing, eye contact), inconsistent response to sounds (especially name), difficulty directing parent's attention, underdeveloped imitation, repetitive toy play. Not every child with ASD will have difficulties in all of these areas. The isolated presence of one of these behaviors does not warrant an ASD diagnosis. It is the collection of these behavior patterns that leads to a diagnosis.

What should I do if I think my child may have autism?

Parents and other caregivers are typically the first to notice autism indicators. Some parents describe children whose development has been atypical since birth, while others describe children who were developing typically and then seemed to lose skills. Other parents do not notice atypical behaviors until their child enters school. Early identification and early intervention are key to optimizing outcomes. If you think you see indicators of autism, talk to your pediatrician or a behavioral professional about getting your child screened for ASD.

How is autism treated?

There is no "cure" for autism; however, research indicates that behavioral intervention can improve the lives of children with ASD and their families. There is no single treatment protocol for all children with ASD, but many different behavioral and educational programs have demonstrated positive effects. Some of the most common interventions are applied behavior analysis (ABA), speech therapy, occupational therapy, parenting programs, and structured teaching methods. An important aspect of any intervention program is that each child's treatment is tailored to meet their individual needs.

Please see reverse for resources.



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RESOURCES

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. (615) 322-8240, (866) 936-8852, vkc.vumc.org

Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD)

TRIAD is a VKC program dedicated to improving assessment and treatment services for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families while advancing knowledge and training. triad.vumc.org

TRIAD Community Engagement Program

TRIAD partners with community cultural and civic organizations to work together to promote welcoming community spaces where individuals with autism and their families can take part. Network activities include staff trainings to increase awareness, the development of research-based supports to increase accessibility for families, and modified performances and activities. triad.vumc.org/ce

TRIAD Diagnostic and Evaluation Services

TRIAD offers clinical services to families with children who have, or are suspected of having, an autism spectrum disorder. Services include diagnostic assessment and behavioral consultation for children up to age 18. Services are facilitated through the Department of Pediatrics Developmental Medicine Clinic at the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt, as well as through research projects.

TRIAD Outreach & Training

TRIAD provides services and training for families, educators, and other professionals, and conducts school consultations. See triad.vumc.org or triad.vkclearning.org.

TRIAD Families First Program

This free training series provides parents of children with autism (ages 2-7) with techniques to enhance social and communication skills and to manage challenging behaviors. triad.vumc.org/ffp

TRIAD Research

TRIAD-directed research programs and affiliated research partnerships examine the causes and treatment of autism. These include projects related to the development of siblings of children with autism, the identification of genetic and core behavioral features of autism, the nature and treatment of sleep disturbance in children with autism, the diagnosis of autism itself, early intervention, and understanding the health and well-being of parents of children with autism. For information on and referral to TRIAD research projects visit the StudyFinder website (vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder/), and select "autism spectrum disorder."

Tennessee Disability Path finder

For information on autism resources external to Vanderbilt, contact Tennessee Disability Pathfinder. Pathfinder provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website includes a directory of more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county, topic of interest, and other filters. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, TNPathfinder.org

Other National and Local Resources

- Autism Society of America, autism-society.org
- Autism Tennessee, autismtennessee.wildapricot.org
- Autism Speaks, autismspeaks.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Autism Information Center, cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.htm
- KidsHealth for kids, teens, and parents, kidshealth.org
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism/pages/default.aspx
- Tennessee Developmental Disabilities Network, TNDDnetwork.org
- Tennessee Early Intervention System (TEIS), tn.gov/didd/teis

