

AUTISM OR OCD?

A Guide for Parents



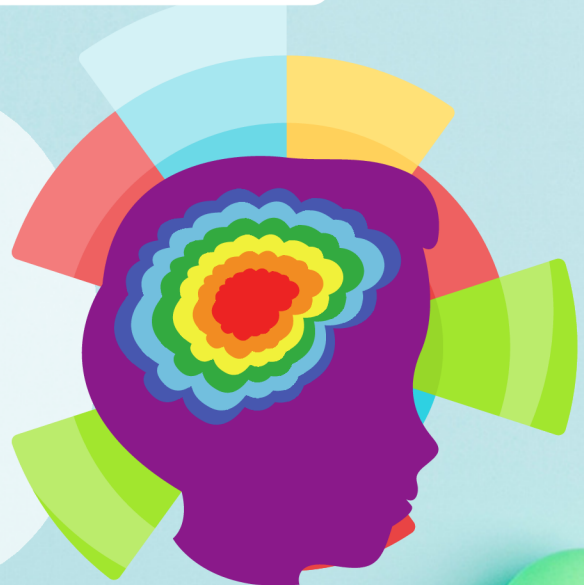
If your child is showing repetitive behaviors, strict routines, or unusual habits, you might be wondering: Is this autism, OCD, or something else? These two conditions can sometimes look similar, but they come from very different places. This guide is here to help you understand the key differences so you can better support your child and get the right kind of help.



WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism is a developmental difference that affects how your child communicates, interacts, and experiences the world. It often includes sensory sensitivities, a need for routine, and repetitive behaviors that bring comfort or help them cope.



OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

OCD is a mental health condition where your child may have upsetting thoughts (called obsessions) and feel like they have to do certain things (called compulsions) to make the anxiety go away. These behaviors are usually fear-driven and feel distressing to the child.



HOW CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE?



CATEGORY

AUTISM

OCD



CATEGORY	AUTISM	OCD
When It Starts	Signs usually appear before age 2	Often starts between ages 7 to 20
Why They Do I	For comfort, routine, or to calm sensory overwhelm	To stop scary thoughts or because they feel convinced something bad will happen if they do not act
Thoughts Involved	Focused interests or sensory issues, not usually upsetting to the child	Intrusive, upsetting thoughts they cannot control
Social Interaction	May struggle with back-and-forth conversations or picking up on social cues	Social skills usually typical unless anxiety interferes
Sensory Sensitivities	Common. Your child may avoid loud sounds, certain textures, or bright lights	Not a main feature unless tied to a specific fear, such as germs
Feelings About Behaviors	Behaviors feel natural, calming, or just "how I am"	Behaviors feel distressing and unwanted
Daily Challenges	Difficulty with transitions, changes in routine, or sensory overload	Trouble focusing, getting out the door, or finishing tasks due to rituals and fears
Best Support Options	Therapies that build communication, support routines, and help with sensory needs	Therapy that addresses the fear behind the behaviors, such as CBT with ERP
Why It Happens	Rooted in brain differences present from birth	Caused by a mix of genetic, brain, and environmental factors



BUT WHAT IF IT'S BOTH?

Some children have both autism and OCD. This is more common than people think. In these cases, it can take time and a skilled provider to figure out what's related to sensory needs and routine, and what's driven by fear and anxiety. Understanding both sides helps build a plan that supports your whole child—not just one part of them.



REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Imagine your child checks the lock on the front door multiple times:

- If they do it because it helps them feel safe or secure, and they think something could happen (like someone might come in if it's unlocked), but they are not overwhelmed by the thought, that may be autism.
- If they do it because they are convinced something will happen—such as someone breaking in or something terrible occurring unless they check it repeatedly in a specific way—that may be OCD.

The action looks the same.
The **why** behind it is what matters.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Pay attention to why your child is doing something. Is it to feel safe and calm, or to stop a scary thought?
- Ask your child (if possible) what they are feeling before and after the behavior.
- Talk to a neurodiversity-affirming provider who understands the difference between autism and OCD.
- Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right or if you're confused by the guidance you've been given, it's okay to get a second opinion.
- Remember: No behavior is "bad." It is communication.



GETTING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

The right kind of evaluation and support can make a big difference. Consider starting with:

- A developmental pediatrician
- A psychologist familiar with autism and OCD
- A neurodiversity-affirming therapist

You can also explore:

- [The Autistic Self Advocacy Network \(ASAN\)](#)
- [The International OCD Foundation \(IOCDF\)](#)



**YOU ARE NOT ALONE
IN TRYING TO FIGURE THIS OUT!**

Getting clarity can help you
and your child feel more
understood, and it can
guide you toward support
that truly fits who they are.

