



Understanding autism beyond common stereotypes is essential for supporting individuals on the spectrum.

Many traits associated with autism, such as social preferences, sensory sensitivities, and coping strategies, are often misunderstood.

This guide aims to help parents recognize the diverse ways autism presents and provide practical steps for supporting their child.



Autism is diverse and often looks different from common stereotypes.

It can manifest uniquely in adults, women, and individuals who have learned to mask their traits.

WHAT AUTISM CAN LOOK LIKE

ENJOYING SOCIALIZING BUT FEELING DRAINED AFTERWARD

Many autistic individuals enjoy social interactions but may feel exhausted afterward. This "social hangover" happens due to the mental effort required to navigate social situations. Your child might appear outgoing but need extra recovery time after events.

How to Support: Encourage quiet, solo activities after social events. Create a predictable schedule to allow for decompression time.



REPEATING SONGS OR TV SHOWS FOR COMFORT

Rewatching favorite shows or listening to the same song repeatedly is a common coping mechanism.

This behavior helps manage anxiety and sensory overload, rather than indicating a lack of imagination.

How to Support: Accept and embrace these repetitions. If necessary, gently introduce alternative activities while allowing access to familiar comforts.





TAKING TIME TO PROCESS SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Autistic individuals may need extra time to process social information.

Your child might pause before responding to questions or prefer reflecting on conversations after they happen.

How to Support: Be patient and allow time for responses.

Avoid pressuring immediate answers and consider using written communication for complex discussions.

USING HUMOR OR SCRIPTING IN CONVERSATIONS

Some autistic individuals use rehearsed phrases, mimic social behaviors, or rely on humor to navigate conversations.

Your child might frequently use specific jokes or phrases as a social strategy.

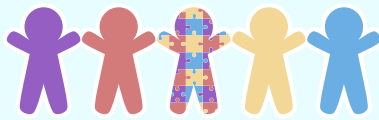
How to Support: Recognize scripting as a valid communication tool. Encourage opportunities for natural conversation in comfortable settings.



STRUGGLING WITH TRANSITIONS, EVEN SMALL ONES

Difficulty with transitions is common in autism. Your child might become upset when routines change or when switching between activities. Predictability and structure can provide comfort.

How to Support: Use visual schedules, timers, or verbal countdowns to ease transitions. Provide advance notice before changes occur.



BEHAVIORAL SIGNS IN DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

TODDLERS

- Repetitive movements (hand flapping, rocking)
- Lines up toys or focuses on parts of objects (like wheels)
- Strong preference for routines; distress with changes
- Unusual sensory reactions (over- or under-sensitive to sound, touch, light)



SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN



- Intense, focused interests (sometimes unusual or very specific)
- Difficulty with transitions or unexpected changes
- Sensory sensitivities (noise, clothing textures, crowds)
- Repetitive behaviors may still be present

TEENS

- Deep, highly focused interests
- Difficulty with flexibility or adapting to change
- Executive functioning challenges (planning, organizing, time management)
- Sensory overwhelm in busy environments



SOCIAL & COMMUNICATION SIGNS IN DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

TODDLERS

- Limited or inconsistent eye contact
- Doesn't respond to their name consistently
- Delayed speech or no spoken words
- Rarely points, waves, or gestures to communicate
- Limited interest in interacting with others



SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

- Difficulty making or keeping friends
- Trouble understanding social cues (facial expressions, tone)
- Takes language very literally
- One-sided conversations or talks mostly about specific interests



TEENS

- Struggles with complex social dynamics (friend groups, sarcasm, nuance)
- May feel "different" or socially isolated
- Increased anxiety, especially in social settings
- May start "masking" (hiding traits to fit in)





ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS



Sensory Sensitivities:

Your child may be overly or under-sensitive to stimuli like sounds, textures, or lights.



Emotional Expression:

Autistic individuals experience a full range of emotions but may express them differently.

Special Interests:

While not all autistic individuals have stereotypical interests like trains, many develop deep passions in specific subjects.



Executive Functioning Challenges:

Planning, organization, and time management can be difficult, often overlapping with ADHD.



Masking:

Some individuals, especially girls and women, may "mask" their traits to fit in, leading to exhaustion and delayed diagnosis.



SEEKING A DIAGNOSIS AND SUPPORT

If you suspect your child is autistic, consider consulting a professional experienced in autism diagnosis.

Pediatricians, developmental specialists, and psychologists can provide assessments.

Seeking support early can improve quality of life.



CHOOSING NEUROAFFIRMATIVE SUPPORT

It is important to seek out professionals who follow a neuroaffirmative approach, meaning they respect and validate autistic identities rather than trying to change or suppress autistic traits.

Behaviorist interventions like ABA often prioritize compliance over genuine well-being, which can encourage masking or camouflaging behaviors to fit in with neurotypical peers.

Research shows that prolonged masking can increase anxiety, depression, and burnout in autistic individuals.

Instead, look for therapists who focus on communication, sensory needs, and self-advocacy, ensuring that your child can thrive without feeling pressured to hide their authentic self.

