

# Talking Matters

[www.talkingmatters.com.au](http://www.talkingmatters.com.au) Ph: 8255 7137

*Helping your child to reach their potential*



## What is autism?

*Autism is becoming more commonly spoken about yet one person with autism may be very different to the next; so what actually is autism?*



Autism is considered a “pervasive developmental disorder”. “Pervasive” meaning it effects all areas of a person’s life and “developmental” meaning it begins in early childhood. It is also considered part of the “autism spectrum”. “Spectrum” meaning it can include a wide range of characteristics, abilities and challenges. So adults and children with autism do vary widely in their learning ability, behaviour and other characteristics yet all share some common challenges. All people on the “autism spectrum” have difficulties with social interaction, communication and restricted or repetitive interests or activities.

**Difficulties with social impairment** can vary from being withdrawn and avoiding social contact through to people who try to interact with others but appear odd or inappropriate at times.

They may:

- have difficulty understanding the thoughts and feelings of others
- lack sympathy or empathy
- have difficulty understanding how to behave in social situations
- not understand the unwritten rules of social interaction
- have difficulty with the social aspects of play with other children
- have difficulty using and understanding eye contact and facial expressions
- have difficulty joining in with others and sharing toys and games
- may prefer to play alone and may like to do things their own way
- have difficulty taking into account the needs and interests of others.



**Difficulties with communication** can vary from people who have no speech or very limited communication through to people who can speak very well but may have difficulty with the social aspects of communicating.

They may:

- have difficulty taking turns in a conversation
- dominate the interaction or get stuck on a favourite topic
- be very literal and not understand more abstract meanings
- ask excessive questions
- repeat things that they have heard somewhere else such as on TV or in a movie.
- not understand that certain topics are not appropriate in certain places or with certain people
- may appear blunt or inappropriate
- have difficulty with the nonverbal aspects of communicating such as facial expressions and tone of voice use a flat or unusual tone or even sound as though they have an accent



**Restricted and repetitive interests and activities** can vary widely depending on the person.

They may:

- have a strong focus they have on one, or a limited range of activities
- focus on a topic such as dinosaurs, transport timetables or ancient Egypt
- focus on a certain movie, TV show or character
- focus on a simple activity such as watching an object spin, or lining things up
- show an intense level of interest and spend long periods of time doing their activity have little interest in other activities not related to their topic of choice
- spend most of their free time doing, talking about or thinking about their interest.



**Some other characteristics** which many people with autism show are

- unusual or repetitive movements such as: flapping, rocking, toe walking, finger movements
- repetitive movements with objects such as spinning, lining up, sorting, flicking
- repeatedly turning things on and off or opening and shutting things
- sensory issues such as sensitivity to noises, smells, textures, certain clothes or foods.

All people with autism share these three areas of difficulty, but have their own personality, and vary according to their intelligence level, family and cultural background. Some may have other diagnosis such as ADHD, intellectual disability or learning problems while others do not. As Sue Larkey states on her website “to know a person with autism is not to know autism”. <http://www.suelarkey.com>

**Each person with autism requires support and understanding tailored to their own unique needs.**

### Common questions

**If I think my child has autism what do I do?** The Talking Matters website has details about the process in South Australia. In other areas ask your doctor to be referred to a paediatrician that specialises in autism.

**Will my child grow out of it?** Autism is a lifelong condition so people do not grow out of it. They do however learn and develop, their needs and abilities change over time and with support many people with autism lead full and happy lives. Support in adulthood may vary from being fully dependant to needing just a little support with relationships. The more support children receive when they are younger the better they will do when they are older.

**What kind of support does my child need?** Support needs vary from child to child so each child should be individually assessed to determine what is most important for them. Many children benefit from speech pathology for communication skills, occupational therapy for fine motor and sensory issues and psychology for behaviour. All these professionals also help children to develop social skills.

**What causes autism?** Autism is thought to be at least partly genetic as it tends to run in families. Scientists are not yet clear about the exact genes or causes as yet but it is clear that it is not caused by the way the child has been raised.