

Autism Spectrum Disorder in Children & Teens

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopment disorder that affects a person's behavior, communication and social skills. The word "spectrum" is used because there is a broad range in the types and severity of symptoms that people experience. Autism can be diagnosed at any age and for most people, symptoms appear early in a child's development and as early as infancy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children be screened for autism. Once diagnosed, it is a lifelong disorder and there are treatments that can help improve a person's symptoms.



Signs & Symptoms

Below are examples of some of the types of behaviors that may indicate a child or teen is autistic. An autistic person may not display all of the behaviors listed below but will show several of them.

Difficulty with communication and social interactions:

- Struggles with back-and-forth conversations
- Avoids making direct eye contact with people
- Displays facial expressions, gestures or body movements that do not match what is being said (i.e. smiling while telling a sad story), or responds in a way to match "social norms"
- Speaks in different tones of voice, such as singing or robot-like
- Struggles to listen to other people or understand another person's point-of-view
- Talks at length about a favorite topic without realizing that other people are not interested
- Doesn't give others a chance to respond in conversation
- Protective of favorite items or belongings, doesn't want to share with others
- Fails to recognize someone's verbal attempts to get their attention, doesn't respond
- Can appear obsessive over certain objects or subjects and fixates on them for extended periods of time, inability to "move on" from that subject

Restricted interests and repetitive behaviors:

- Easily upset when there are minor changes in their daily routine
- Has overly focused interests or long-lasting intense interests, such as with numbers, details or facts
- Repeats specific behaviors frequently, displays unusual behaviors (i.e., repeating words, phrases or noises)
- Experiences either less or more sensitivity to sensory input, such as light, noises, clothing textures or temperature

An autistic person may also experience challenges with sleeping or becoming easily irritated.

Strengths and abilities:

Autistic people display many strengths and may excel in the following areas:

- Ability to learn things in detail
- Long-term memory
- Visual and auditory learning
- Math, science, music and art

Our Locations

KANSAS CITY
4300 Brenner Dr.
Kansas City, KS 66104

WICHITA
1507 W. 21st St. N.
Wichita, KS 67203

HAYS
205 E 7th St.
Hays, KS 67601

What You Can Do to Help

If you know an autistic child, here are some ways you can support them:

- **Get a professional consultation.** It's important to have a physician or licensed mental health professional examine the child for an accurate assessment and diagnosis of their physical and mental health.
- **Be gentle, calm, patient and compassionate.** Do not become angry or hostile toward them as that could scare them because they will struggle to understand your frustrations with their behavior.
- **Keep a consistent routine with them every day,** from wake-up time to bedtime. Keep the schedule somewhere that they can always see it, such as on the refrigerator or a bulletin board in the family room. If there needs to be changes to the schedule, let them know as far in advance as possible. A predictable schedule is extremely helpful for all children, especially those with autism.
- **Join a training for parents/caregivers** to learn skills for managing difficult behaviors.
- **Keep everyday items well organized** so that each item has a specific place where they can always find it. This may include having a designated shelf for their backpack, cleaning favorite clothing items often and always organizing clothes in the same drawers.
- **Use organizers for school materials, homework and supplies.** Help them understand the importance of writing down assignments and bringing home the necessary books.
- **Work closely with the child's teachers** and school guidance counselors to ensure everyone knows how to best support the child.

Contact KVC Hospitals for Support

KVC Hospitals is a network of nonprofit children's psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment centers serving youth ages 6 to 18. Each year, we give thousands of youth a safe place to heal, build resilience, and overcome struggles with behavioral and mental health challenges. Our compassionate team of psychiatric, medical and behavioral health professionals provides a nurturing and therapeutic experience along with a treatment plan tailored to meet each child's individual needs. The goal of our treatment programs is for each child to safely return home with the resources and supports in place to live a healthy and happy life in their community.

If you're concerned that a child in your care is struggling to manage symptoms of autism or has other mental health needs, **call KVC Hospitals at 913-890-7468.** We're available 24/7 to answer your questions.

Here's a list of additional resources you can contact for help:

- Call the child's primary care physician or your local community mental health center
- Get resources and additional information from the Autism Research Institute at www.autism.org
- Text HOME to 741741 for 24/7 support from the Crisis Text Line
- Call the National Alliance on Mental Illness helpline at 800-950-6264, which is staffed by volunteers who have mental health conditions