

Defining the Spectrum

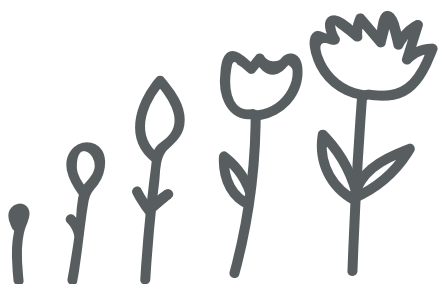
The term “spectrum” simply means that symptoms may look very different for each person. Although there are clear patterns that define the diagnosis of ASD, there is a wide range of how different symptoms affect different people.

Rather than thinking of a number line of increasing intensity, you can think of ASD like a “buffet” — everyone at the table gets the same basic courses, but the portioning and condiments will be unique to the individual.

Because of this, ASD can seem very different in each person and can also shift over the course of a lifetime. For example, one child may have a very hard time with social skills and have very few repetitive behaviors. Another child might be consumed by routines and have an easier time with language. A girl who seems shy in kindergarten may become more verbal in middle school, but also begin to struggle with anxiety or depression.

How is ASD Diagnosed?

There is no medical test that can be done to diagnose ASD, including blood tests or brain imaging. But there are a number of assessments that should be completed as part of an evaluation for an ASD. Most of these tests are known as “standardized” or “validated” tests. They require a well-trained person (a doctor or psychologist) to interact with an individual while looking for some very specific types of behavior patterns. Other assessments help the clinical team rule out other disorders that may look like ASD or that often go along with ASD (like ADHD). Some tests are used to help the team understand an individual’s strengths and weaknesses to ensure the right planning for supports, interventions and goal setting.



There will usually be a combination of tests done directly with the individual being assessed, as well as interviews that rely on parent report or input from teachers/caregivers/ employers. Both types of information (direct and indirect) are important for making a diagnosis. This helps the clinical team to get a good behavioral “snapshot,” as well as a history of any behaviors they may not get to observe during appointments.

Understanding ASD

ASD is a developmental disability that is caused by the way the brain develops. Symptoms of ASD appear during early childhood (although they may not result in a diagnosis until later), and include significant challenges in a person's ability to relate to and communicate with other people.

The medical criteria for diagnosing Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). A major change from the earlier fourth edition is that ASD is now considered a single spectrum, rather than several sub-types (like PDD-NOS, Asperger's Disorder, and Autistic Disorder). The reason for this change is that research over the past decades has shown that the core symptoms in each subtype were actually similar and shifted in intensity over time.

Because ASD is defined by a common set of core behaviors, it is best represented as a single diagnosis.

It is important to know that anyone diagnosed with any type of ASD before this change should still meet the new criteria for ASD.

