

∞ INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

# Understanding **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

*A guide for families, caregivers & educators*

# What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

*ASD is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects how people perceive the world, communicate, and relate to others. No two people on the spectrum are the same — ASD is truly a spectrum of experiences.*

## Neurological

ASD is rooted in differences in brain development and neural connectivity, present from birth.

## A Spectrum

Every autistic person has unique strengths, challenges, and ways of experiencing the world.

## Lifelong

ASD does not go away, but with the right support, autistic individuals can thrive at every age.



Approximately 1 in 36 children in the U.S. is diagnosed with ASD | It is 4x more common in boys than girls

# The Spectrum of ASD

*ASD presents differently in every individual — no two journeys are the same*



Social  
Communication

Sensory  
Sensitivities

Repetitive  
Behaviours

Special  
Interests

Executive  
Function

Emotional  
Regulation

## High Support Needs


- May be non-speaking or use AAC devices
- Significant support needed for daily tasks
- Intense sensory sensitivities
- Challenges with changes in routine

## Moderate Support

- Functional communication with support
- Some independent daily living skills
- Social interactions with guidance
- May struggle with flexible thinking

## Lower Support Needs

- Often speaks fluently but may struggle socially
- Highly focused special interests
- May mask difficulties in public
- Challenges still real but less visible

 *Support needs can change over time and in different environments. Avoid using 'levels' to limit expectations.*

# Signs & Characteristics of ASD

## Social Communication

- Difficulty understanding facial expressions & body language
- Prefers parallel play or solitary activities
- Takes language very literally
- May struggle to start or maintain conversations

## Sensory Experiences


- Over or under-sensitivity to sound, touch, light, taste
- May seek intense sensory input (spinning, jumping)
- Overwhelmed in busy or loud environments
- Clothing textures or food textures can be distressing

## Patterns & Routines

- Strong preference for sameness and routines
- Deep, focused special interests
- Repetitive movements (stimming) — a form of self-regulation
- Distress when routines are disrupted unexpectedly

*Remember: these traits are not flaws — they are differences. Many autistic people celebrate their unique way of experiencing the world.*

# My Child Has Been Diagnosed — Now What?

 *It's okay to feel overwhelmed, confused, or even relieved. A diagnosis is not an ending — it's a doorway to understanding and support.*

## 01 Allow Yourself to Feel

Give yourself permission to process the news. Grief, shock, and hope can all coexist. Seek support for yourself too.

## 02 Learn About ASD

Read from autistic voices and reputable sources. Understanding the diagnosis is your greatest tool.

## 03 Connect With Specialists

Build a team: developmental paediatrician, speech therapist, OT, psychologist. Early intervention makes a difference.

## 04 Find Your Community

Connect with other ASD families and autistic adults. Support groups and organisations offer invaluable guidance.

## 05 Advocate for Your Child

Learn your child's rights at school and in healthcare. You are their most powerful advocate — trust your instincts.

## 06 Focus on Strengths

Identify what your child loves and excels at. Build confidence by nurturing their passions alongside any challenges.

# Early Intervention & Professional Support

*Research shows that early, targeted support leads to the best long-term outcomes*



## Speech & Language Therapy

Develops communication skills, whether verbal, sign-based, or through AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) devices.



## Occupational Therapy

Addresses sensory processing, fine motor skills, self-care skills, and daily living tasks. Vital for independence.



## Behavioural Support

Positive, evidence-based approaches to support emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and build adaptive skills.




## Educational Support

IEPs, EHCP plans, and specialist schools/inclusion support help children access learning in ways that suit them.

★ *Start as early as possible — but it's never too late. Support at any age makes a meaningful difference.*

# The Power of Play Therapy

 What is Play Therapy? Play therapy is a structured, therapeutic approach where trained therapists use play as the primary language of communication with children. For autistic children, it meets them in their natural world — play.

## Why Play Works for ASD

- Play is the natural language of childhood
- Reduces anxiety in a safe, fun environment
- Builds social skills through real interaction
- Develops emotional vocabulary and self-expression
- Strengthens the parent-child or therapist-child bond

## Types of Play Therapy

DIR/Floortime — Child-led, follows the child's interests

LEGO® Therapy — Social skills through collaborative building

Social Stories — Narratives to understand social situations

Sand Tray Therapy — Expressive & sensory exploration

# Benefits of Play Therapy for Autistic Children



## Communication

Children who struggle with verbal communication can express needs, emotions, and ideas through play. This often transfers to improved verbal skills.



## Social Skills

Turn-taking, sharing, joint attention, and reading social cues — all practised naturally within the play environment.



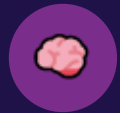
## Emotional Growth

Children learn to identify, name, and manage their feelings. Emotional regulation built here has a lasting impact on daily life.



## Reduced Anxiety

A predictable, playful environment reduces stress. Over time, children generalise this calm to real-world settings.



## Cognitive Skills

Problem-solving, creative thinking, and flexible reasoning are all developed through purposeful therapeutic play.



## Family Connection

Parent-inclusive play therapy helps families understand and connect with their child, transforming relationships at home.

# Art Therapy: Creating Without Words

*Art therapy uses creative processes — drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, and more — as a therapeutic tool. For autistic individuals who may find words difficult, art opens a powerful channel for expression and communication.*



## Benefits of Art Therapy

- Non-verbal expression of thoughts and feelings
- Reduces anxiety and promotes calm focus
- Develops fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination
- Builds self-esteem through creative achievement
- Offers sensory exploration in a controlled way
- Supports processing of experiences and trauma
- Encourages imagination and flexible thinking



## Art Forms Used in Therapy

**Drawing & Painting** — Safe, familiar, self-expressive

**Clay & Sculpture** — Sensory-rich and grounding

**Collage** — Low-pressure, builds visual narratives

**Photography** — Perspective-taking and communication

**Digital Art** — Engaging for tech-oriented learners

**Textile & Crafts** — Repetitive motion soothes sensory systems

# How to Introduce Play & Art Therapy at Home

*You don't need to be a therapist to create therapeutic moments — you just need intention*

## Step 1 | Create a Safe Space

Dedicate a calm, predictable area for creative play. Minimise distractions. Let your child know this is their space with no right or wrong answers.

## Step 2 | Follow Their Lead

Watch what your child gravitates toward — trains, colours, textures, repetitive patterns. Use these as entry points. Don't redirect; join them in their world.

## Step 3 | Use Open-Ended Materials

Stock playdough, paint, sand, building blocks, puppets, sensory bins. Open-ended materials invite exploration without expectation or judgment.

## Step 4 | Set a Routine

Schedule regular, consistent play/art sessions. Predictability reduces anxiety and helps your child look forward to these moments with safety and joy.

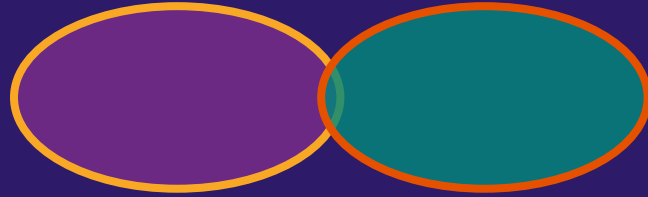
## Step 5 | Work with a Therapist

An accredited play or art therapist can guide structured sessions and coach you in therapeutic techniques to use between sessions at home.

## Step 6 | Celebrate All Expression

A scribble is as meaningful as a masterpiece. A child knocking down a tower is as valid as building one. Value process over product, always.







 *Tip: Always consult with your child's therapist or paediatrician before starting a new therapy approach at home.*



# Every Autistic Person Deserves to Thrive

*With understanding, early support, play, and creativity — every child can reach their potential.*

## Key Resources & Next Steps

-  National Autistic Society (NAS) — [autism.org.uk](https://autism.org.uk)
-  British Association of Play Therapists — [bapt.net](https://bapt.net)
-  British Association of Art Therapists — [baat.org](https://baat.org)
-  Autism Helpline — 0808 800 4104 (free)
-  'The Reason I Jump' by Naoki Higashida — written by an autistic author
-  Ambitious About Autism — [ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk](https://ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)