

Early signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ASD is a developmental disorder that is present from infancy or early childhood.

Most parents of children with ASD notice differences in their child's development and behaviour very early, sometimes before he/she has turned two years of age.

Early signs of ASD

Children who have a diagnosis of ASD can show signs very early, sometimes even in infancy. ASD is often more obvious after the child turns two years of age.



There are five behaviours that are “red flags” for autism¹

- ▶ Does not babble or coo by 12 months
- ▶ Does not gesture (point, wave, grasp) by 12 months
- ▶ Does not say single words by 16 months
- ▶ Does not say two-word phrases on his or her own by 24 months
- ▶ Has any loss of any language or social skill at any age

Any of these five “red flags” does not mean the child definitely has ASD, but a child showing these behaviours should have further assessment by professionals knowledgeable about ASD. In Victoria, the five “red flags” are increasingly being recognised by GPs, maternal and child health nurses, early childhood educators, and allied health clinicians.

We know that the symptoms of ASD begin during early childhood, but there is limited evidence about when symptoms actually start and how severe they can be². Some of the early indicators are listed below.

Early indicators of ASD

- Aloof, in his/her own world
- Limited or unusual eye contact
- Limited body language, facial expression or social smile
- Inconsistent response to name
- Not pointing to share interest
- Poor imitation (e.g. Peek-a-boo, waving bye-bye)
- Resists being cuddled, touched or held
- Repeated hand, finger or body movements
- Limited object exploration and play with toys
- Arranges objects in a strict order or has specific routines
- Upset over small changes and difficulties with transitions
- Unusual or repetitive preoccupations
- Likes to play with or hold unusual objects
- Unusual sensory interest and response
- Limited infant babble and vocalization
- Delayed onset of speech
- Poor understanding of speech, gestures and facial expression
- Use of other's body as a tool
- Lack of social imitative/pretend play
- Loss of previously acquired words ^{3,}

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Regression in ASD

Loss of previously acquired skills, or regression, is reported in 20% - 33% of children and can include loss of words, vocalisations, non-verbal communication, social interaction skills, imitation or pretend play. The common time for loss of skills is reported as between 15-19 months⁷. The pattern of symptoms has led to suspicions that postnatal environmental factors such as the Measles Mumps Rubella (MMR) vaccine trigger autism. Reports of a possible link began in the 1980s, but no causal link has been found ^{8,9,10}

If you are worried about your child's development and behaviour, talk to a professional because they can help you. They are knowledgeable about the early signs of ASD, understand the importance of early intervention and can help you to contact services that provide support for you and your child.



References

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