

Autism in Adolescents

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological developmental difference that affects how individuals relate to their environment and others. About 1 in 100 individuals are diagnosed with autism, which often leads to challenges in social communication and behaviours, with its impact varying widely among individuals. Simply put, autism changes the way that you see, experience and understand the world.

Impact of Autism in Adolescence

Adolescence brings heightened emotional intensity and social integration challenges. Key issues include:

- **Secondary School Transition:** The shift to secondary school increases academic and social demands, with executive functioning difficulties complicating planning and organisation.
- **Puberty:** Hormonal changes can worsen symptoms like anxiety and mood swings.
- **Identity and Gender Exploration:** Autistic teens may explore non-binary or transgender identities amidst societal norms.

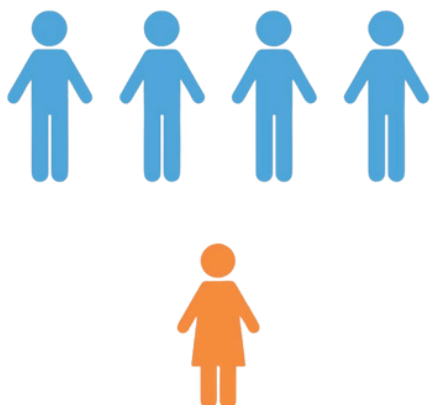
Recognising Signs of ASD in teens includes noticing:

- Difficulty with social interactions and friendships
- Sensory sensitivities (e.g., to textures, sounds) which can cause discomfort.
- Rigid adherence to routines or rituals and struggles with changes
- Intense focus on specific interests.
- Challenges in verbal and non-verbal communication around expressing wants, needs, and desires clearly.
- Differences in emotional regulation, leading to varied behavioural responses in different situations.

Individuals on the spectrum often develop skills in ways that differ from neurotypical individuals. This can affect the order, extent, and pace of skill development, which varies significantly from person to person.

Autism is diagnosed four times more often in men than in women, with a prevalence rate of 33 boys to one girl, suggesting a diagnostic gender bias. This may be due to girls having a different, often camouflaged, autism profile.

Boys are 4x as likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls.



Masking

Autistic teens may mask their traits to fit in with neurotypical peers, either consciously or unconsciously. This involves altering their behaviour or mimicking social cues to avoid standing out and to try to succeed socially. While masking may help in the short term, it can lead to emotional burnout as the effort becomes overwhelming. They watch, they imitate. They try and copy how their peers are behaving, but sometimes they just get it slightly wrong. So the timing is slightly off, or they're slightly over the top compared to what their peers expect which can increase their level of frustration and their feelings of alienation.

Parenting Styles

Consistency in parenting is vital, with an authoritative approach (clear boundaries combined with great warmth) being most effective.

Communication

Communication can be challenging due to differences in social interaction, language processing, and emotional expression so think about adapting your communication style to use clear, concrete language, with structure, and practicing emotional literacy.

Impact on Family Dynamics

Having an autistic teen can bring some extra stress and pressure so it's important to adapt expectations and maintain unity in parenting.

Planning for the Unexpected

In families who thrive on routine, introducing occasional unplanned moments can help prepare a young person for the unexpected. While it might feel counterintuitive, having scheduled "chaos" can ease anxiety when things don't go as planned.

Bullying & School Avoidance

Autistic teens may be at a greater risk of bullying so try to notice any physical, behavioural, or emotional changes. They may require support, affection, and guidance both at home and school.

Late Diagnoses

Some autistic teens are diagnosed late, often in secondary school, due to masking or subtle symptoms that become more apparent during increased social demands. A formal diagnosis of autism can help to unlock understanding and resources.

Gender Identity

It has been suggested that confusion about identity in ASD may also extend to gender-related issues. There is limited research in this area, but there are an increasing number of young autistic teens identifying as non-binary or transsexual. Many autistic teens may not strongly identify as either male or female, preferring pronouns like "they" or "them." It's crucial for parents to be supportive, curious and allow time for their children to explore their whole identities.

School Avoidance

Children and young people with autism often face additional challenges in school, leading to anxiety and symptoms resembling Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Autistic individuals may experience heightened anxiety due to sensory and social challenges, and difficulty identifying emotions.

Key Strategies for Parents

The support needs of autistic individuals varies widely and requires an individualised approach. While some may seek ongoing assistance in daily living, community participation, and communication, others may prefer minimal or no support in these or other areas.

- **Understanding and Patience:** Acknowledge their challenges with empathy.
- **Strengths:** Know and validate your teens strengths which can include being detail-oriented, logical thinkers, and having in-depth knowledge in specific areas.
- **Emotional Support:** Validate feelings, offering outlets for expression, and normalising intensity, and provide tools for managing emotions.
- **Structured Environment & Social Settings:** Routines help reduce anxiety, but it's also a good idea to introduce occasional unplanned moments.
- **Manage Masking:** Create a safe space for your teen to express themselves.
- **Advocacy:** Collaborate with educators for supportive learning environments.
- **Support for Independence:** Introduce responsibilities gradually to build confidence.
- **Encouraging Positive Risk-Taking:** Gradually expose teens to new experiences to build confidence and help them become independent by introducing responsibilities gradually.

Seeking Help

A formal diagnosis provides access to tailored support and educational accommodations. Professional evaluation, therapeutic interventions, and educational adaptations can help autistic teens thrive.

- **Professional Evaluation:** For accurate diagnosis and guidance.
- **Therapeutic Interventions:** Explore therapies like CBT, social skills training, and sensory integration therapy.
- **Educational Adaptations:** Schools can support autistic teens by understanding their individual needs and offering structured support:
 1. Many autistic students have average or high IQs but uneven skills—strong in some areas, like verbal ability, but weaker in others, such as working memory. Teachers can help by speaking slowly, allowing processing time, and supporting social language.
 2. Addressing sensory needs—like offering quiet spaces, adjusting lighting, or using tools like fidgets or headphones—can reduce overload and boost comfort.
- **Family Involvement:** It can help for families to have therapy, or be active in support groups.
- **Peer Mentoring:** Encourage peer support programs.
- **Skill-Building:** Offer workshops for job readiness and independent living.

Conclusion

Understanding autism in teens means acknowledging their unique strengths and challenges, creating supportive environments, and advocating for inclusive practices in education and community settings.

This factsheet consolidates insights from Dr. Jane Gilmour, Dr Tamasine Black, Jess Birchall, London Autism Service & Corinna Laurie, National Autism Society.