

What does autism look like?

Ash is on his own track

Meet Ash. Ash is 10 years old. He can tell you anything you want to know about trains. He can probably tell you things you don't want to know about trains too. Ash never stops talking, mostly about trains. He talks about which trains run better and which ones he wants to buy next time the family goes shopping. He talks on and on and doesn't seem to notice when people have stopped listening. He has been told many times not to talk so much but it doesn't help. He does it at school too, and it sometimes makes his teacher angry. Ash does well at school and loves reading – especially about trains.

Ash doesn't have any close friends. His parents think that it's because he talks on and on without listening to others. He usually wants to play games his way. But often his games end because he is obsessed with the rules. No one is having fun. He often asks his mother why boys come over to play with his brother but no one wants to come to play with him.

Ash seems to think more about trains than about people. Children who have difficulties with social communication like Ash benefit from learning how to tune into others' feelings and needs. Tuning into others helps them find better ways to relate and gives them tools to communicate more effectively in social situations.

Does Ash have an autism spectrum disorder?

Ash shows some of the behaviours that may be found in children with autism spectrum disorders. These are life-long conditions that affect children's development in lots of ways.

Experts think that autism spectrum disorders are due to differences in the way the brain develops and works. This can lead to patterns of difference in children with autism spectrum disorders and cause a number of difficulties for these children including social relationship difficulties (eg difficulty relating to peers).

Diagnosing autism spectrum disorders is not simple. Ash's behaviours can be seen in all children from time to time.



What you might see in a child with an autism spectrum disorder

A child with an autism spectrum disorder may...

- have trouble understanding nonverbal communication cues
- have poor conversation skills
- have strong memory for facts and details
- have interests that totally take over
- take things literally
- be good with computers
- have difficulty making friends.

Parents and carers might notice their child...

- doesn't look at them when speaking
- doesn't notice if they are bored or in a hurry
- talks on and on
- talks over others and doesn't listen
- remembers obscure information, and may insist on all fine details being right
- obsessed with one thing (eg knows everything about a particular make of car and never stops talking about it)
- if they are told to 'hold on', may take it literally and take hold of something
- doesn't understand jokes
- may prefer to work with computers rather than with people
- prefers to be with adults or younger children.

How parents and carers can help

- Comment on what other people are feeling. For example, you may say, "Your dad is frowning. He looks angry."
- Help your child to recognise social rules for communication. Try to make sure he or she listens to others and lets them take a turn in the conversation.
- Tell your child directly what to do if he or she is not sure how to communicate.
- When things go wrong, help your child to talk about what he or she was doing and feeling, what others were doing and feeling and to talk about what he or she could do next time to get a different result.
- Tune into strengths. Try to appreciate your child's unique perception of the world.

Are you worried that your child is a bit like Ash?

Here's how to get help

- Talk with your child's classroom teacher about how your child is managing at school and find out what resources the school can offer.
- Ask to speak to the school psychologist or counsellor.
- Talk to your doctor about the possibility of an assessment and referral to a children's mental health specialist.

To be diagnosed with one of the autism spectrum disorders, a team of mental health professionals will need to make a careful assessment. The team is likely to include a psychologist, a speech pathologist, an occupational therapist and a paediatrician.

For more, please refer to the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on recognising and getting help for children with mental health difficulties.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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