

# Early detection vital in autism



Early identification of autism allows for interventions such as speech-language therapy and can lead to better functioning in later life

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The *New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline* (2008) contains information for people with an autism spectrum disorder, their families, health professionals, support service providers and those involved in education. It is based on overseas and New Zealand evidence, experience and practice, and is the first in the world to cover the whole of life. This article looks at some aspects of the guideline's recommendations that might help GPs: early detection and appropriate referral; the importance of knowing where adults can get a diagnosis locally; and important sources of information for families and health professionals alike.

Any professional in the health or education field may come across children where there are concerns that could indicate an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). GPs may be the first professionals consulted by concerned families. Early identification of children with ASD is essential, as this enables early intervention and is likely to lead to better function in later life.

GPs should be alert to the possibility of an ASD and refer early where there are grounds for concern. "Red flags" are important (Panel 1), but many children warranting referral and assessment will have less obvious symptoms. Children with Asperger syndrome, who, by definition, have normal language development, will present with concerns related more to social interaction difficulties and/or problems coping with change, or with strong interests or even obsessions. The features of ASD are listed in the guideline (see Panel 2 for details on obtaining the guideline).

You suspect an ASD in a child: what now? When referring a child with possible ASD to a paediatrician, consider also referring to audiology and to an early intervention service for a speech-language therapy assessment and the input of the speech-language and early intervention teacher.

In a child where language delay or disorder is part of the presentation, there are at least two reasons to consider referral to a speech-language therapist at the same time as to a paediatrician: (1) speech-language assessment may not be available in the hospital setting so will provide useful information for the paediatrician and family; and (2) it is worth getting onto the relevant waiting list for speech-language therapy and other early intervention services as soon as possible. At the same time, refer for a hearing test.

## Adults seek diagnosis also

Increasingly, diagnostic assessment is being sought for teenagers and adults suspected of having an ASD, particularly Asperger syndrome. This occurs because symptoms change over time and previous explanations for behaviour stop making sense. Social deficits become more obvious as people leave childhood behind and as academic or employment demands increase. Sometimes diagnosis is sought when a person gets into difficulties at work, with the law, or experiences emotional problems. Often parents seek a diagnostic assessment of themselves (or their spouse) after the diagnosis of their child.

## Red flags for referral

Panel 1

Key signs for identification of children one to three years old with ASD. All children with ANY of the following findings MUST be referred for a general developmental assessment:

- no babble, pointing to or showing of objects or other gesture by 12 months
- no meaningful single words by 18 months
- no two-word spontaneous (non-echoed or imitated) phrases by 24 months
- ANY loss of any language or social skills at ANY age.

Source: an extract from Table 1.1 in the New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline

## Guideline and resources

Panel 2

### New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline

- download from: [www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/nz-asd-guideline-apr08](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/nz-asd-guideline-apr08)
- phone (for hard copy): 0800 ASD 222 (273 222) or 04-496 2277 (order no. HP 4504)
- email: [moh@wickliffe.co.nz](mailto:moh@wickliffe.co.nz)

### Autism New Zealand

Source of support, information, and parent training programmes such as Early Bird and HELP: [www.autismnz.org.nz](http://www.autismnz.org.nz)

### Altogether Autism

Evidence-based information service for individuals with ASD, their families and professionals: [www.altogetherautism.org.nz](http://www.altogetherautism.org.nz)

### Parent to Parent

Parent resource and support: [www.parent2parent.org.nz](http://www.parent2parent.org.nz)

### ASDIN (Autistic Spectrum Disorder Information Network)

Source of information: [www.asdin.org.nz](http://www.asdin.org.nz)

Lawyers and courts sometimes arrange for diagnostic assessment, and mental health services seek opinions from ASD specialists. However, in other cases, the GP may be the first professional approached. GPs need to be aware of where adults in their area could go for a diagnosis. Whereas diagnosis of children is typically made by paediatricians, the diagnosis of young people and adults is generally made by psychologists and psychiatrists. The guideline points out the value of a correct diagnosis.

*Referral and diagnosis leads to access to parent education programmes, such as the ones run by Autism New Zealand*

In terms of information and support, the guideline identifies that "effective educational programmes for parents and families lead to improved outcomes both for people with ASD and their carers and families". Referral and diagnosis leads to access to parent education programmes, such as the ones run by Autism New Zealand. The guideline itself is a useful source of information and is freely available. GPs should also be aware of the services offered by other organisations (Panel 2).

GPs may be asked for their views on the efficacy of different interventions. The guideline covers researched interventions and what the evidence (if any) is for each. For example, there is insufficient evidence to recommend a gluten and casein-free diet. There is also no evidence to support a link between MMR and autism.

Early detection, diagnosis and referral are some of the areas where the guideline could help GPs, their clients of all ages and professionals in many other walks of life.

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