



Diagnosing Autism in Young Children

Why should young children be evaluated for autism?

The possibility that a child has autism or an autism spectrum disorder can be frightening. At the same time, it is important to have such children diagnosed to assure that they receive the proper treatment early in their lives. Requesting or being referred to have a diagnosis does not mean that the child automatically has autism or a related disorder, it just means that a child has some behaviors that require a special look from the expertise of a specialist who is experienced in diagnosing autism.

Who should diagnose autism?

A physician or a licensed mental health professional (such as a psychologist, licensed clinical social worker, etc.) can make a diagnosis of autism. Sometimes, in addition to the physician or mental health professional, a diagnostic team participates in the evaluation of the child. The team can include a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, a social worker, a physical therapist, an early intervention specialist, an educational specialist, or other health care professionals who may be able to help the team understand the needs of the child. It is important that all diagnostic team members have experience working with and diagnosing autism and other developmental conditions in young children.

What does an evaluation for autism involve?

A diagnostic evaluation session for autism is more like a “play session” where a professional or professionals observe a child doing typical child activities such as playing with toys, interacting with others, and responding to requests for objects and activities. They usually also interview the parents to get a complete developmental history and specific descriptions of the child’s behavior at home, preschool, day care, or in community settings like the grocery store. Depending on the age of the child, the diagnostic session can take anywhere from about 30 minutes up to 4 hours. If a child becomes tired or fussy during that time, a parent can and should ask that the child take a break from the testing. Also, diagnostic sessions should be scheduled at times that are good for young children. Diagnostic sessions should not be scheduled during a nap or feeding time.

What will the parent get from the diagnostic team?

After the diagnostic session, the physician, licensed mental health professional, or diagnostic team should provide the parent with a report. The report should include a listing of the tests they used to determine the presence of autism, a description of the observations they made of the child, and the specific behaviors that indicate the presence or absence of autism. If the child has autism, the diagnostician or diagnostic team should write the specific type of autism they observed in the child. If the child does not have autism, but has other disabilities, they should be listed and explained. Additionally and most importantly, the diagnostician or team should provide a number of recommendations to guide treatment providers in providing services to the child. It is less important to know a diagnosis for a child, and more important to have the information needed to tell treatment providers what to do to help a child grow and develop.