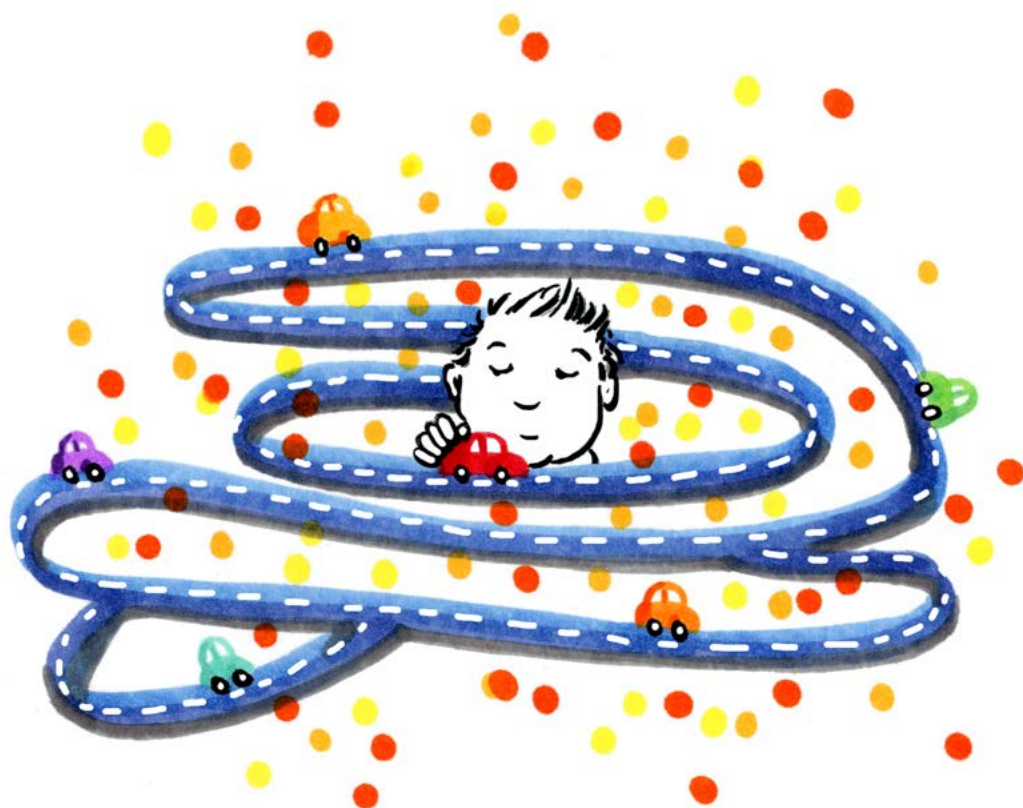


# A CHILD ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM AT DAY-CARE

This guide explains characteristics relating to the autism spectrum, how these are seen in the behaviour of a child on the autism spectrum, and how to take these characteristics into consideration at day-care with an autistic child.



AUTISM FINLAND

## ABOUT THE AUTISM SPECTRUM



Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects how a child communicates and interacts with other people, and how the child senses and experiences the world around them. It is a lifelong condition that is caused by different development in the central nervous system.

Autism spectrum disorder manifests in a highly individual way, and the disabilities it causes also vary greatly from person to person. It can be said that once you've met one person on the autism spectrum, you've only met one person on the autism spectrum.

Around 1-1,2 % of the global population is on the autism spectrum. Autism spectrum disorder occurs more in boys than girls. In earlier decades in particular, the gender ratio for autism diagnoses reached 15:1. This mostly applied to Asperger syndrome, because the diagnostic criteria were developed to describe the characteristics of autism in boys. Girls and women exhibit the syndrome in a slightly different way from boys and men. Because of this, many girls on the autistic spectrum were left undiagnosed. The situation concerning the diagnosis of girls and women has nevertheless begun to improve, and nowadays girls on the autism spectrum are better recognised. The current ratio of boys to girls on the autistic spectrum is closer to 3:1.

A change to how autism spectrum disorders are diagnosed is under way. The ICD-11 classification will be taken into use and it will replace the ICD-10 classification. The change means that separate diagnoses (autism, Asperger syndrome, atypical autism, childhood disintegrative disorder) listed under pervasive developmental disorders in the current international classification of diseases will be removed and replaced with a single umbrella

diagnosis of “autism spectrum disorder”. This will mean that people on the autism spectrum will receive a common diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, which is then further specified using additional attributes to describe functional ability.

## **WHAT CAUSES AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER?**

There are genetic and physiological factors behind autism spectrum disorders. Autism spectrum disorder is a multifactorial inheritance condition, but events which take place during foetal development also have an effect. Autism spectrum disorder is not caused by dysfunctional parenthood, bad upbringing or other such factors. Autism spectrum disorder is a permanent characteristic.

Special characteristics in different areas can be seen in the behaviour of all people on the autism spectrum. The following will be examined below with regard to children on the autism spectrum:

### **Social interaction**

A child on the autism spectrum finds it difficult to understand others’ emotions and to express his or her own feelings. This means he or she can find it hard to create and maintain friendships. He or she may also have difficulty maintaining eye contact. He or she may react differently with expressions and gestures.

### **Social communication**

A child on the autism spectrum experiences various levels of difficulty understanding and producing spoken language and other non-verbal expression. For example, she or he may have difficulty deducing how another person feels based on tone of voice, and may interpret language very literally.

## **Social imagination**

A child on the autism spectrum has difficulty in perceiving different situations outside his or her own range of experience. He or she may find it difficult to see things from another person's perspective and empathise with others.

She or he may also exhibit sensory over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity, problems with executive function and various repetitive behaviours and specific interests.

## **SENSORY SENSITIVITY**

The sensory information received and interpreted by a child on the autism spectrum is individual and atypical. The child may be over- or under-sensitive to different stimuli, such as sound, touch, various smells and tastes, light, colours, temperatures, and pain. For example, background noise which would rarely bother others may sound rather loud and disturbing to a person on the autism spectrum. This can cause anxiety and even be perceived as physical pain. Visual and auditory sensitivity are the easiest to notice. Over- and under-sensitivity can occur in the same sensory area and can vary greatly over the course of an individual's life, sometimes even daily.

A child on the autism spectrum can easily become sensorily overwhelmed. This is known as sensory overload and it can be exacerbated by noises, lights, smells, and crowds. In situations when the child experiences sensory overload, he or she may aim to reduce the impact by closing off some of his or her senses, withdrawing to a quiet place, or calming himself or herself down in an individual way such as by jumping, flapping their hands, flicking things or rocking (these are known as "stimming"). All of the aforementioned are ways in which a child on the autism spectrum aims to regulate sensory load, and he or she should not be prevented from doing so unless absolutely necessary.

## Special characteristics relating to sensory processing (examples):

| TO SENSORY<br>PROCESSING                        | OVER-SENSITIVITY                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | UNDER-SENSITIVITY                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SIGHT</b>                                    | Avoids bright, flashing lights;<br>Too many colours and clutter<br>can induce anxiety; Objects<br>which move towards the child<br>or other objects may cause<br>fear                                                                              | Seeks out strong visual<br>sensory stimulation                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>SOUND</b>                                    | Finds certain frequencies<br>unpleasant: drill, noises made<br>by machines and lights,<br>people's voices (hissing,<br>buzzing, rustling); Sudden and<br>loud noises (dogs barking,<br>children crying, clapping);<br>Sound from multiple sources | May only hear in one ear;<br>May be partially or wholly<br>deaf in the other. May not<br>acknowledge certain<br>sounds; Enjoys noisy places<br>and crowds; Likes slamming<br>doors or the noise caused by<br>doors breaking |
| <b>TASTE</b>                                    | Avoids strong flavours, spicy<br>favours, unfamiliar favours.<br>Note: the structure, colour<br>and smell of food are also<br>important                                                                                                           | Seeks out strong sensory<br>stimuli (chili, spicy foods)                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>SMELL</b>                                    | Avoids strong smells and<br>fragrances in the environment<br>(people, food, animals, nature)                                                                                                                                                      | Prefers strong smells<br>(including unpleasant<br>smells)                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>TOUCH</b><br>(light touch<br>and deep touch) | Touching, clothing seams,<br>materials, zips, labels, socks,<br>hair care, showers – all feel<br>unpleasant. Sensitivity to pain                                                                                                                  | Seeks out sensory stimuli<br>relating to deep touch in<br>particular; Difficulty<br>identifying e.g. pain                                                                                                                   |
| <b>BALANCE<br/>AND BODY<br/>AWARE-<br/>NESS</b> | Motor clumsiness; Avoids high<br>places, uneven terrain; Fear of<br>escalators and lifts                                                                                                                                                          | Seeks out movement, e.g.<br>rocks constantly, sways                                                                                                                                                                         |

## **Communication**

A child on the autism spectrum may have varying levels of difficulty with understanding and using language and with interpreting expressions and gestures. He or she may understand spoken or written language very literally. He or she may use unusual gestures or expressions and have difficulty processing and remembering what was discussed. Some children on the autism spectrum have very limited speech or do not talk at all. They require augmentative and alternative communication methods to aid them with communication. It is important to find a way for the child to communicate so that he or she can express himself or herself and be understood in his or her environment.

## **Executive function**

A child on the autism spectrum may have difficulties with executive function. He or she may for example have difficulty perceiving how much time a task will take, and in which order things should be done to achieve the best result. It may be important to him or her to do things in a certain way and in a familiar order. Even a small change in routine can prevent or complicate progress. From the outside, the behaviour may seem selfish, self-initiated or indifferent, but in reality it may be a sign of challenges relating to executive function. The child may also find it difficult to remember orders or suggestions that he or she has been given, particularly if too many are given or too quickly.

Executive function difficulties apply to many areas of daily life: dressing, hygiene, performing various tasks, etc. Usually executive function can be improved by planning ahead and structuring activities. A child on the autism spectrum perceives things differently and benefits from knowing what is going to happen - when it is going to happen - where it is going to happen - with whom it will

happen - how long it will last and what will happen afterwards. To support executive function, both illustrated and written instructions can be created to support task progress, environmental perception and dealing with change.

### **Sensitivity to stress**

The ways in which people become stressed and react to stress are highly personal. Some people seem to remain calm even in difficult situations, while others stress over even the smallest things. Different life events and external stimuli can raise stress levels to varying degrees depending on the situation. If a person's stress level is already raised for one reason or another, the impact of another stress factor can be more significant than usual. Factors which raise stress levels can differ greatly from short, situational things or events, such as sensory stimuli, or longer-term things such as changes in our living environment. It is possible to prepare for many factors which raise stress levels through forward planning.

An autistic child's nervous system can easily become overloaded and his or her stress levels can rise as a result. This overload may be caused by e.g. a noisy environment, change and unclear situations, and social interaction. For people on the autism spectrum, there is usually a much finer line between a normal stress level and chaos than in people who do not have a neuropsychiatric diagnosis. Note that positive events and situations also raise stress levels, such as a long-awaited trip to a child's favourite place, or a birthday. Challenging behaviour is always related to elevated stress levels, so reducing stress also reduces challenging behaviour.





## SUPPORTING INTERACTION

A child on the autism spectrum often finds it challenging to interact with others and requires support. Reciprocity, for example, can prove challenging in interaction. A child on the autism spectrum will not necessarily start a conversation or feel the need for discussion, greetings, or to share his or her experiences. Some are also clearly less interested in personal relationships. However, this doesn't mean that a child on the autism spectrum does not want to interact. Interaction is complicated by facial blindness, which is rather common and makes it difficult to recognise people, and by difficulty interpreting other people's expressions, gestures and feelings.

## AT DAY-CARE

Below are a few situations from the daily routine at day-care and tips on how to work with a child who is on the autism spectrum.

## Dressing

Dressing skills required hand-to-eye coordination, awareness of your own body, action chaining, and spatial awareness. Successful dressing requires practice, skill development, and help from an adult. Often a child on the autism spectrum can associate putting on clothes with unpleasant sensory experiences, and this can also make dressing unpleasant. A child on the autism spectrum finds it easiest if he or she has his or her own space and sometimes a dedicated time for dressing.

It may be difficult for him or her to receive instructions in a bustling environment. Visual supports are often a good aid for dressing and undressing. A child on the autism spectrum often requires more time for dressing, beginning with listening to instructions. Instructions that are given unclearly or too quickly in succession slow down the process, rather than speed it up.

### WHAT HELPS:

- a clearly defined space
- clear instructions (visual)
- help from an adult
- consider sensory sensitivities

### WHAT DOES NOT HELP:

- rushing

## Outdoor activities

Outdoor activities and time spent outdoors are important for a child's well-being and development. Many children on the autism spectrum enjoy trips and walks through nature. Time spent outdoors should be fun and safe for everyone. Free play outdoors can be difficult for a child on the autism spectrum. Sometimes she or he might struggle to make up or invent a game while other

times she or he may find it difficult to find a common game with other children. A child on the autism spectrum often needs help from an adult to find a fun game. Pay attention to the sensory issues of a child on the autism spectrum when planning trips outdoors.

### **WHAT HELPS:**

- clear instructions
- help from an adult
- consider sensory sensitivities
- support in social interaction situations, such as playing

### **Mealtimes**

Eating and mealtimes can often be challenging for a child on the autism spectrum. The senses can be overloaded by the different smells and sounds at mealtimes. A child on the autism spectrum can sometimes have a very restricted diet limited to just a few foods. This is usually due to sensory sensitivities. A child can find the smell, taste, colour or structure of food so unpleasant that it is simply impossible for them to eat it. It may also be that he or she does not like mixing food together and instead prefer to eat the different components of their food separately. Forcing children to taste or eat something isn't suitable for children on the autism spectrum at all. It is important to make mealtimes as pleasant and peaceful as possible, which also makes it easier to try new foods. Visual instructions can be a good aid for smooth mealtimes.

### **WHAT HELPS:**

- instructions  
(written or illustrated)
- planning ahead
- consider sensory sensitivities

### **WHAT DOES NOT HELP**

- forcing

### **Afternoon nap**

An afternoon nap is very important for many children of day-care age. A child on the autism spectrum can find it difficult to fall asleep since his or her sleep rhythm and needs may differ from other children. Some children on the autism spectrum only sleep for a few hours per day. It may take them longer to fall asleep and settling down to sleep may involve various routines and rituals. It would nevertheless be good if the time spent at day-care included one or more moments when a child on the autism spectrum could settle down and balance his or her sensory load in a quiet place.

### **WHAT HELPS:**

- instructions
- planning ahead
- consider sensory sensitivities

### **WC / Going to the toilet**

Children on the autism spectrum develop their toilet skills very individually. Skill development depends on whether their autism is associated with another diagnosis, such as a developmental disorder. Many children on the autism spectrum also have stomach problems or problems with digestion, such as constipation. At day-care, using the toilet is usually connected to other events during the day, such as outdoor activities, mealtimes, and napping. This often works with a child on the autism spectrum. It may be helpful to make visual instructions for using the toilet to make action chaining easier.

### **WHAT HELPS:**

- time
- prepare in advance
- clear instructions

### **Playing**

A child on the autism spectrum may play and use toys differently from his or her peers. He or she may find it difficult to play imaginary games, for example he or she may be unable to see a toy shovel as anything other than a toy shovel. He or she may enjoy playing alone with a certain toy. The child may repeat the same game every day. She or he may place items and objects in lines or rows, or focus on a certain part of a toy and spend time with it. This may relate to the autistic child's way of calming down (stimming).

Sometimes a child on the autism spectrum may take it upon himself or herself to control and organise other children's games and activities to suit his or her own wishes. This may result in differences of opinion between the autistic child and other children. A child on the autism spectrum needs support and guidance from adults during play. Clear and consistent rules make play and games easier. The game may go more smoothly in small groups or with just one other child. It is best not to demand too much. Small, successful play sessions with others may be more than enough. Social situations strain a child on the autism spectrum and it may be that after social situations he or she has a greater need to withdraw to quietly calm down alone.

## WHAT HELPS:

- time for individual play
- rules
- help from an adult



### Spending time with others and parties

A child on the autism spectrum may have a greater need to be alone. Sometimes she or he will be able to participate in time spent with others and at other times will prefer to be left alone. It may be enough to simply watch an event from an open door. It is important for a child on the autism spectrum to be able to withdraw to his or her own space if necessary and to remove himself or herself from a situation he or she consider to be noisy, for example.

We often prepare for parties and celebrations by decorating our surroundings. This applies to Christmas and Easter in particular. These environmental changes may place a surprising amount of strain on an autistic child. It is a good idea to plan ahead for such events in good time by discussing upcoming parties using pictures, for example. In general it is worth preparing for parties and other events in advance by discussing them together. A child on the autistic spectrum can benefit significantly from visual instructions or social stories while preparing for a party.

### **WHAT HELPS:**

- planning ahead
- instructions
- consider sensory sensitivities

### **Challenging behaviour**

A child on the autism spectrum may sometimes exhibit challenging behaviour. Behaviour is called challenging when it produces clear physical, emotional, financial or social harm to the person himself or herself or to the environment. There is always a reason for challenging behaviour. Challenging behaviour often relates to special sensory processing characteristics, executive function challenges, difficulties with interaction and communication, and strain caused by social situations. Various changes in the environment, such as new people, or sudden changes mid-way through the day may greatly affect someone on the autism spectrum. This will cause the child's stress levels to rise. If the situation goes unnoticed, there is a risk of reaching the so-called chaos threshold, and challenging behaviour follows.

The most effective way to reduce challenging behaviour is to prevent stressful situations in advance. It is equally important to consider the causes of the situation in which challenging behaviour occurred and the events which led to the situation, so that the child can learn a different way to behave. The best way to prevent challenging behaviour is to consider the autistic child's needs regarding sensory processing, executive function, communication and interaction, and to adapt the environment and activities to make them more autism-friendly.

### **WHAT HELPS:**

- Consider sensory sensitivities
- planning ahead
- supporting communication

### **COOPERATION**

A child on the autism spectrum has various needs relating to growth and development. He or she may need daily support relating to care, education, teaching and rehabilitation. A plan is usually made for support, and the day-care received by the child is a part of the plan. If a child has an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, it is very likely that she or he is receiving rehabilitation, such as speech or behavioural therapy, and sometimes other forms of therapy, too. Rehabilitation appointments can vary greatly, so the majority of rehabilitation and learning new things takes place in daily life at day-care and at home, outside of rehabilitation itself.

Good cooperation is open and respects the child and their family. The family's expertise is of primary importance: they probably have the best knowledge of the special characteristics of their child, and for example, what things have achieved the most progress. Cooperation between various parties (family, day-care, therapists) is important in order to remain aware of the goals of rehabilitation and to work together. This ensures the best possible support for the child.

A child on the autism spectrum is first and foremost a child; an individual with lots of strengths and resources. A child with autism may for example be excellent at paying attention to small details, and may have another special talent, gift or skill. An autistic child's strengths can also be found in their areas of special interest. Encourage and motivate the child to engage in his or her interests. Remember that these areas of particular interest can act as motivators and rewards when learning or doing new things or things which the child does not particularly enjoy very much.

### HELPFUL TIPS (IN FINNISH)

Communication and interaction:

**[www.papunet.net/materiaalia/](http://www.papunet.net/materiaalia/)**

Executive function:

Guide to managing shutdowns (in Finnish):

**[www.tampere.fi/liitteet/n/5nmDdsiHG/AISTI.pdf](http://www.tampere.fi/liitteet/n/5nmDdsiHG/AISTI.pdf)**

Guide for copying with a stuck-situation

**[www.tampere.fi/liitteet/k/6KbelURd0/Keinoja\\_jumitilanteisiin.pdf](http://www.tampere.fi/liitteet/k/6KbelURd0/Keinoja_jumitilanteisiin.pdf)**

Papunet: Day-to-day situations

**[www.papunet.net/materiaalia/arjen-tilanteet](http://www.papunet.net/materiaalia/arjen-tilanteet)**

Challenging behaviour:

**The Haaste -model**

**(Model for preventing and reducing challenging behaviour)**

**[www.autismiliitto.fi/haastemanuaali](http://www.autismiliitto.fi/haastemanuaali)**



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[www.autismiliitto.fi](http://www.autismiliitto.fi)