

Autism Traits in Young Children

Cari Ebert, MS, CCC-SLP



cariebertseminars.com

Autism is an array of characteristics, and each child has a unique mixture of traits.

Communication Differences

- Uses few or no socially motivated gestures (e.g., pointing at objects or events to share the experience with others, showing objects to others, or waving “hi” and “bye-bye”)
- Starts talking later than other kids
- Enjoys making unusual sounds or using an unusual tone of voice
- Doesn't appear to understand questions or directions
- Doesn't consistently respond when spoken to
- Communicates by using another person's hand as a tool to get their needs met
- Has difficulty interpreting facial expressions, tone of voice, and body postures
- Stopped saying words that were previously spoken
- May say words and/or use gestures, but has difficulty using them together at the same time
- Has a good rote memory for letters, numbers, TV jingles, etc.
- Repeats what other people say verbatim; enjoys repeating lines from favorite movies, shows, and songs (delayed echolalia); is a gestalt language processor
- Is drawn to music; may sing or hum tunes before speaking any words; is able to mimic the intonational patterns of a speaker

Social Interaction Differences

- Has reduced or selective eye contact with others
- Shows little interest in social reciprocity/turn-taking games (e.g., rolling a ball back and forth)
- Resists cuddling and being held
- Does not consistently respond to own name being called
- Prefers to play alone or with adults who engage in child-led play
- Focuses intently on own interests
- Uses a limited range of facial expressions
- Appears unaware of the feelings of other people
- Does not appear to share enjoyment with others by smiling, laughing, or looking at them
- May be overly social and affectionate with strangers
- Has social learning differences/does not learn naturally through social interactions with other people; does not attend to and imitate the actions of others

Differences in Interests and Behaviors

- Has an intense fondness for certain objects; these comfort items may be regulating to the child
- Focuses intently on own interests; does not attend to what is happening in the environment
- Shows more interest in objects than people
- Is interested in how things work; likes gadgets (e.g., vacuums and light switches) more than toys
- Plays in unique ways; studies toys from different angles; enjoys gathering, sorting, and lining up objects; is interested in how objects move—likes to watch them spin, roll, or wobble
- Focuses intently on certain parts of objects
- Prefers consistency; thrives in predictable situations; finds safety in the familiar
- May stiffen and flair their fingers or posture their bodies in unusual ways
- Has strong interests in certain sensory experiences (e.g., licking objects, flapping hands)
- Has over- or under-reactions to certain types of sensory input