



EESNC

Ethiopian Eritrean Special Needs Community(EESNC)

eesncdmv@gmail.com

www.eesnc.org

First Steps After Receiving an Autism Diagnosis

Introduction

Receiving an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis for your child can evoke a range of emotions. While some parents may feel shocked, others might have anticipated it. Regardless of your initial reaction, it's natural to feel overwhelmed as you reimagine your child's future. You are not alone, and it's important to remember that while there is no cure for autism, there is hope. Your child can learn, grow, and develop new skills within their potential. The crucial first steps include educating yourself about the diagnosis, adjusting the home environment to meet your child's needs, and seeking professional therapeutic services.

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in communication, social interactions, and repetitive behaviors or interests. In 2013, a new diagnostic manual redefined autism, combining what were previously known as autism, Asperger's syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) under the single diagnosis of ASD.

Children with ASD fall along a spectrum, ranging from those who are verbal and high functioning to those with significant impairments in language and cognitive abilities. ASD is categorized into three levels based on severity:

- **Level 1: Requiring Support**
Children at this level are considered higher functioning, typically without significant verbal or cognitive impairments. Previously diagnosed with Asperger's or PDD-NOS, they require minimal support.
- **Level 2: Requiring Substantial Support**
These children may have some verbal or cognitive deficits and noticeable social impairments, even with support in place.
- **Level 3: Requiring Very Substantial Support**
The most severe level, where children have significant impairments in verbal and cognitive abilities and cannot live independently.

Common Characteristics of Autism

Every child with autism is unique, but some common characteristics include:

- Difficulty with social interactions, such as making eye contact and reading facial expressions.
- Rigid adherence to routines and difficulty with changes.
- Repetitive behaviors, like hand flapping or spinning.
- Intense interests in specific topics or objects.
- Echolalia, or repeating words and phrases.
- Challenges with pretend play, such as spinning a toy car's wheels instead of pretending it's driving.

Autism occurs in about 1 in 36 children and is five times more common in males than females. While the exact cause is not fully understood, it is believed to involve a complex interplay of genetic and environmental factors.

Supporting Your Child at Home

Use Visuals

Children with autism are often visual learners. Tools like the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) can help supplement verbal communication. Consulting with a speech or behavioral therapist can determine if PECS is suitable for your child. Other visual aids, like action imitation or timers, can also be beneficial.

Increase Structure

A structured environment helps children with autism feel more secure. Use visual schedules, house rules, and visual warnings to provide predictability in their daily routines.

Reinforcement and Punishment

Positive reinforcement can effectively shape your child's behavior. Implement a visual reward system, offer choices, and provide immediate praise for good behavior. Negative behaviors, such as tantrums for attention, are best ignored when safe, teaching your child to seek attention appropriately.

Be Aware of Sensory Difficulties

Children with autism may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to sensory stimuli. Understanding your child's sensory preferences can help you create a comfortable home environment.

Seeking Professional Services

Early intervention is crucial for maximizing your child's development. After a formal evaluation, follow the recommended services and notify your child's school to start an Individualized

Education Program (IEP). An IEP ensures the school provides necessary services like speech and occupational therapy or special education.

Professional Services for Children with Autism

Consult with professionals to determine which services best meet your child's needs. Commonly beneficial services include:

- Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Speech therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Behavioral therapy (ABA)
- Physical therapy
- Developmental therapy
- Social skills groups
- Psychiatric services and medication management

Additionally, consider support for yourself through family therapy, respite services, or local parent support groups such as www.eesnc.org.

Where Should I Start to Find Help in Maryland, DC, and Virginia?

Screening, Evaluation, and Determination of Eligibility for Services

- **Accessing Services for Preschool Children:**
 - **Infants and Toddlers Program (ITP):**
 - Child Find team collaborates with ITP staff.
 - Determines eligibility for special education services.
 - Designs Individual Family Service Plan – Extended (IFSP – Extended).
 - Ensures the child receives special education services by their third birthday.
 - **Children Aged 2 Years 10 Months to 5 Years:**
 - Parents call Child Find main offices to schedule a screening appointment.
 - Parent signs consent forms.
 - Screening conducted by a special education teacher or speech pathologist.
 - If the child passes, developmental expectations are discussed, and other services/resources recommended.
 - If a delay is detected in development domains (cognition, language, fine motor, adaptive, gross motor, social-emotional), a formal evaluation is conducted.
 - Based on evaluation results, a disability may be determined, and eligibility for special education and related services established.

- An Individual Education Program (IEP) is developed with the parent.

For Children Under 3 Years of Age:

Maryland:

- Contact [Maryland's Infants and Toddlers Program \(MITP\)](#).
- Phone: **1-800-535-0182**
- MITP provides services to families with children who have developmental delays or disabilities. A service coordinator will help determine eligibility and create an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) to meet your child's needs.

Washington, DC:

- Contact [Strong Start DC Early Intervention Program](#).
- Phone: **202-727-3665**
- Strong Start provides evaluations and services for children under 3 with developmental delays. A service coordinator will guide you through the eligibility process and develop an IFSP tailored to your child's needs.

Virginia:

- Contact [Virginia's Early Intervention Program](#).
- Phone: **1-800-234-1448**
- The program assists families in identifying supports and services for children with developmental delays. A service coordinator will work with you to develop an IFSP and plan for transitioning to school services as your child approaches their third birthday.

For Children Over 3 Years of Age:

Maryland:

Contact Information:

- [Child Find](#)
- For more information or to make a referral, please call 410-424-3280
- Contact your local school system. Reach out to the school your child is zoned for or call the Special Education office at your local Board of Education.
- After the initial contact, the school may conduct additional evaluations and request previous reports. If eligible, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be developed with input from a Multi-disciplinary Team (M-Team) meeting.

Washington, DC:

- Contact your local school or the **Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)**.

- Phone: **202-727-6436**
- Website: [OSSE Special Education](#)
- The school will evaluate your child's needs and develop an IEP in collaboration with you, focusing on educational support and services.

Virginia:

- [Child Find](#)
- Contact your local school district. Reach out to the Special Education office at the Board of Education or the school your child is zoned for.
- Phone: **800-552-3962**
- The school will conduct necessary evaluations and obtain previous diagnostic reports. An IEP will be developed during an M-Team meeting, specifying the educational services and supports your child will receive.

Should I Tell Others About My Child's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Deciding to share your child's ASD diagnosis is a personal decision. Here are some considerations to help you decide:

- 1. Early Intervention and School Services:**
 - To access early intervention or school services, you will need to share the diagnostic reports that mention ASD with professionals.
 - Example: Providing your child's diagnosis to their teacher can help them implement specific learning strategies tailored to your child's needs.
- 2. Healthcare Providers and Therapists:**
 - Sharing the diagnosis with your Primary Care Provider and other therapists is beneficial for planning appropriate interventions.
 - Example: Informing your child's speech therapist about their ASD can guide the development of a more effective communication plan.
- 3. Relatives and Friends:**
 - It's up to you whether to inform relatives and friends. If they spend a lot of time with your child, they may have noticed developmental differences but may have misinterpreted autism-related behaviors as being shy or spoiled.
 - Example: A grandparent may understand better why your child avoids eye contact and can learn ways to engage more effectively with them.
 - Sharing the diagnosis can foster understanding and empathy, helping them to better support your child and your family.
 - Example: Friends who understand your child's diagnosis might be more patient during social gatherings, making them more comfortable for everyone involved.

Ultimately, sharing your child's diagnosis can help others understand their challenges and provide better support. However, the decision remains yours to make based on your comfort and circumstances.

For more information or support, please reach out to our team at [Ethiopian Eritrean Special Needs community](#). 301.201.6244 We are here to help you navigate this journey with your child.