



# SUPPORTING LOVED ONES WITH AUTISM: Tips and advice

by Sarah O'Kelley, Ph.D.

## What are some signs and symptoms of autism? When do these normally show up?

Autism diagnosis is based on the absence of typical behaviors and the presence of atypical behaviors across two main symptom domains - weaknesses in social communication skills and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests. Most of the signs and symptoms of autism are observed before the age of 3 years, with many noted before 12-18 months of age. The first concern for many families is noticing their child is not speaking around their first birthday.

Other differences in autism include:

- social-communication skills such as limited eye contact
- reduced shared affect and enjoyment (e.g., young children with autism are less likely to direct facial expressions to others or look back and forth at others' face when enjoying an activity)
- not directing the attention of others
- limited use of gestures (e.g., pointing to show something interesting) and imitation skills
- not playing with toys or using them as intended (e.g., opening and closing doors or spinning wheels of a car rather than rolling it around)
- repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand/arm flapping or repetitive whole body movements)
- sensory differences, including a mix of being overly sensitive and under-responsive

## What are some misconceptions about autism?

One of the biggest misconceptions is that autism looks the same in everyone. Given the range of behaviors that can be included as characteristics and part of the diagnostic criteria for autism, there are numerous ways that autism can present from person to person, and these features and behaviors can change throughout life. There is not any one symptom that stands alone in the autism diagnosis, and an autistic person could exhibit skills and symptoms across the "spectrum." There are some combinations of autism symptoms that are very challenging and limiting and that have a tremendous impact on daily functioning, while there are other combinations that are enough to qualify for a diagnosis but may be less limiting and noticeable to others.

## What does Autism Awareness Month mean to you, and why is it important?

There are many important discussions about the terms used within the autistic community, and over the years the focus on autism in April has recently evolved from "awareness" to "acceptance." I encourage others to learn more about terminology related to autism, specifically from self-advocates and families, such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network.

From my perspective as a professional specializing in autism, April provides a chance to focus on understanding autism across the lifespan and brings together self-advocates, families, and communities to celebrate and support one another in many ways. I enjoy connecting with organizations

throughout our community focused on autism as they hold events, such as the Autism and Sensory Friendly Barons game, the Autism walks throughout the state, and many more.

### **How can loved ones and friends support people in their lives with autism?**

We see many families who feel isolated and experience stigma related to their child with autism. Some families avoid social or family gatherings or public outings with their child due to the behavioral challenges that may occur and the negative reactions of others. Autism is one of many invisible disabilities that are often misunderstood as bad parenting or bad behavior, which results in being judged. Learning more about autism and about the strengths and weaknesses of the child would be a good place to start. Verbally acknowledging the child's strengths is also important. Another big need is respite or assistance- offer to stay with the child or accompany your loved one to an appointment or outing with their child.

### **What are some resources for those living with autism?**

Alabama has established [Regional Autism Networks \(RAN\)](#) throughout the state to provide information and education regarding autism and programs and services across the state, and the RANs are available to anyone- families, self-advocates, professionals, educators, and community members. I also encourage families to find information and support networks of caregivers with shared experiences to learn about autism, local services, and events. The organization [Autism Support of Alabama](#) is a great start for connecting to others.

As a member of the [Alabama Autism Providers Network](#), I can also say that there is tremendous passion and energy among those serving autistic people across the lifespan throughout Alabama. We do not have enough providers to meet the needs of autistic individuals and their families across the state, but we are working hard to improve early identification and diagnosis, recruiting talented providers to practice in Alabama, and to increase the capacity of service providers to address all these needs, including mental health and transition supports.



### **What are some key UAB services that you want the community to be aware of?**

UAB is home to our region's RAN, and anyone can call 205-934-1112 or email [uabran@uab.edu](mailto:uabran@uab.edu) with questions or requests for information. The UAB RAN provides frequent free events such as Community Education Workshops focused on different topics such as toilet training, managing difficult behaviors, improving sleep and Lunch and Learns focused on resources throughout the state. The [UAB Civitan-Sparks Clinics](#) have been providing interdisciplinary care, including diagnostic evaluations, for people with autism and other developmental disabilities for over 40 years. Further, there is a strong network of researchers and clinicians across many departments and schools at UAB who provide training for future leaders in autism.