

Understanding Autism: A Guide for Parents



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Introduction

Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a developmental condition that affects how a child communicates, interacts with others, and experiences the world. Children with autism have unique strengths and challenges, and every child's needs and abilities are different.

What is Autism? Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by differences in:

1. Social Interaction: Children may have trouble:

- Making or maintaining friendships
- Understanding social cues (eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice)
- Taking turns in conversation or play

2. Communication: Communication differences vary widely and may include:

- Delayed speech or language • Difficulty with back-and-forth conversation
- Atypical language patterns (echolalia, scripting) • Use of gesture, pictures, or devices to communicate

3. Repetitive Behaviours and Routines: Children with autism may:

- Engage in repetitive movements (hand-flapping, rocking)
- Line up objects or follow rigid routines • Become distressed with changes in schedule

4. Rigid Thinking: Children may:

- Prefer predictable routines • Have difficulty with transitions
- Insist on eating specific foods or taking the same route every day

5. Sensory Differences: Children may be more sensitive or less sensitive to sensory input such as:

- Lights • Sounds
- Textures • Movement
- Smells • Tastes

6. Special Interests: Many children develop strong interests in specific topics (e.g., trains, dinosaurs, weather patterns, maps).

Diagnosis and Early Intervention

Autism is usually diagnosed in early childhood by a qualified healthcare professional (pediatrician, psychologist).

Early intervention and individualized support can significantly help children develop communication, social, and learning skills.

If you have concerns about your child's development, seek an assessment as early as possible.

Support and Resources

1. Therapies: Children with autism may benefit from:

- Speech Therapy (communication skills)
- Occupational Therapy (sensory needs, fine motor skills, daily living skills)
- Behavioural Therapy such as ABA or developmental/relationship-based programs
- Social Skills Training

2. Education supports: Children may qualify for specialized learning supports at school.

An Individualized Program Plan (IPP) outlines goals and supports.

3. Support Groups: Parent groups and family networks can help with emotional support and practical advice.

4. Advocacy: Learn about your child's rights at school, in healthcare settings, and in the community.

Creating a Supportive Environment at Home

1. Provide Structure and Routine: Predictability can reduce anxiety and help children feel safe.

2. Use Clear Communication: Use short sentences, visual supports, schedules, and social stories when helpful.

3. Encourage Positive Behaviours: Positive reinforcement (praise, rewards, encouragement) helps build skills effectively.

4. Support Sensory Needs: Identify sensory preferences (e.g., needing quiet spaces, weighted blankets, movement breaks).

5. Patience and Empathy: Behaviour is communication. Try to understand the need behind the behaviour.

Additional Resources: Below is a list of supports available to families in Central Alberta. Resources are divided into Publicly Funded options (no direct cost to families) and Privately Funded / Fee-for-Service options (may involve payment or insurance).

PUBLICLY FUNDED RESOURCES

1. School-Based Speech & Occupational Therapy

If your child is in school (including Pre-K), ask the school about SLP and OT support.

Note: Support varies between schools and depends on assessed need.

2. Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD)

Government program providing disability-related supports.

- Phone: 780-427-2711
- Website: www.alberta.ca/fscd.aspx

Note: Requires a formal diagnosis. Supports may include respite, behaviour intervention, and specialized services.

3. Autism Society of Central Alberta

Supports families through advocacy, events, and community education.

- Phone: 403-340-2606
- Website: <https://autismalberta.ca/>

Note: Community support organization; not a diagnostic service.

PRIVATELY FUNDED / FEE-FOR-SERVICE RESOURCES

1. Aspire Special Needs Resource Centre (Red Deer)

Provides developmental assessments, ASD diagnosis, speech therapy, OT, preschool programs, and behavioural intervention.

- Phone: 403-340-2606
- Email: inquiries@aspirepecialneeds.ca
- Website: www.aspirespecialneeds.ca

Note: Many services require family payment; some may be partially funded through FSCD.

2. Society for Treatment of Autism (Calgary)

Offers diagnostic assessments, behavioural therapy, and specialized programs.

- Phone: 403-253-2291

Note: Highly specialized autism services; fees vary.

3. The Abilities Hub – Sinneave Family Foundation (Calgary)

Focus on adolescents and young adults with autism.

- Phone: 403-210-5000
- Website: <https://sinneavefoundation.org/>

Note: Emphasis on life skills, employment, and transition planning. Some programs free; others fee-based.

4. To the Stars Wellness Centre (Lacombe)

Multidisciplinary clinic offering:

- Psychology & counselling
- Occupational therapy
- Sensory-based intervention
- Play skills
- Developmental & behavioural assessments
 - Phone: 403-786-0006
 - Website: <https://tothestars.ca/>

Note: Family-centered model where multiple services can be coordinated in one location.

5. Autism Speaks (General Information)

Reliable website with toolkits and educational materials.

- Website: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>

Note: Not specific to Alberta and does not provide local referrals.

Conclusion

Parenting a child with autism is a journey filled with learning, growth, and unique joys. With the right understanding and support—both at home and in the community—your child can thrive. You are not alone, and many resources are available to guide you along the way.