



# How to Recognise Early Signs of Autism and Why Early Intervention is Important

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# Adam at 18 months old

Happy child, mostly on his own at home but seeks out caregivers at times

Loves playing with noisy toys and spinning wheels



Image by jcomp on Freepik

Goes to polyclinic for regular checks and vaccinations

Can walk and run, scribbles with a pencil but does not speak any words, is not responding to his name, and has reduced eye contact



Mother: I am worried that Adam is not talking. Could he have autism?

# What is Autism?

Always  
Unique  
Totally  
Interesting  
Sometimes  
Mysterious

- Difficulties with social communication and interaction  
+ restricted repetitive behaviours (RRBs)

Worldwide: 1 in 100 children (World Health Organisation, 2023)



### **Severe/Higher needs**

*No eye contact*

*Minimally-verbal*

*Repetitive actions*

*Intellectual disability*

### **Moderate**

*Inconsistent eye contact*

*Short phrases for needs*

*Repetitive language*

*Low/normal IQ*

### **Mild/Lower needs**

*Fair/normal eye contact*

*Conversational ability*

*Literal thinking*

*Normal/high IQ*



# Early Signs of Autism in 1–3 Year Olds



- ✓ Reduced eye contact or response to name at any age
- ✓ By 12 months
  - ✓ Not babbling or cooing
  - ✓ Not using gestures to communicate (pointing, waving)
- ✓ By 18 months
  - ✓ No single words
  - ✓ Not imitating actions or sharing enjoyment
  - ✓ Not trying to get parents' attention or responding when parents point to something
  - ✓ Not much interest in other children
- ✓ Any loss of language or social skills (regression)

# Other Signs of Autism in Older Children



- ✓ Communication difficulties
  - ✓ Reduced use of facial expressions or body language
  - ✓ Accented speech, self-talk, repetitive language, confusing I/you
  - ✓ Difficulties understanding jokes, idioms, sarcasm
  - ✓ Difficulties in maintaining conversations or seeing another person's perspective
- ✓ Social difficulties
  - ✓ Difficulties understanding emotions or feeling empathy
  - ✓ Difficulties understanding social cues or personal space
- ✓ Repetitive play, behaviours, or body movements
- ✓ Difficulties adapting to changes in routines or environment
- ✓ Having obsessions about certain objects or topics
- ✓ Having unusual reactions to the five senses

# Child Health Booklet

## SCREENING AT 15 MONTHS TO 18 MONTHS

Date of Screening: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Main caregiver: \_\_\_\_\_

### PARENTAL CONCERNS

Please inform your doctor if your child has ANY of these difficulties:

- Does not babble, point or use gestures by 12 months
- Does not speak a single word by 18 months
- Has lost any language skills
- Does not respond readily to affection

Please answer the following and tick "NO" / "YES"

Have you any worries about your child's:

- |                     | NO                       | YES                      |                |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| • Health and growth | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Diet and feeding  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Sleep             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Behaviour         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |

### VISION

Does your child frown, tilt his head in order to see better or close one eye while looking into the distance in bright light?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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### HEARING

Does your child respond to sounds even when the source is not within his sight, e.g. calling of his name, ringing of the telephone?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

### DEVELOPMENTAL CHECKLIST (TO BE COMPLETED BY PARENTS)

Please tick "Yes"/"No"

#### Personal Social

- |   | YES                      | NO                       | Age (mths)<br>when 90% achieve<br>the milestone |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 Your child can indicate what he wants without crying or whining. He may do this by pointing, pulling and making speech-like sounds. (Indicates wants by gestures) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 13.5  |
| 2 When you are doing housework, your child copies what you are doing. (Imitates household activities)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 16  |
| 3 Your child can hold a regular cup himself and drink   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 16  |

## SCREENING AT 2 YEARS TO 3 YEARS

Date of Screening: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Main caregiver: \_\_\_\_\_

### PARENTAL CONCERNS

Please inform your doctor if your child has ANY of these difficulties:

- Does not use spontaneous (non-echoed/non-imitated) 2-word phrases by 24 months
- Has lost any language or social skill
- Does not point to show things he is interested in
- Does not follow when someone is pointing something out to him
- Does not respond readily to affection
- Prefers to play alone

Please answer the following and tick "NO" / "YES"

Have you any worries about your child's:

- |                     | NO                       | YES                      |                |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| • Health and growth | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Diet and feeding  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Sleep             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Learning          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |
| • Behaviour         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Specify: _____ |

### VISION

Does your child frown, tilt his head in order to see better or close one eye while looking into the distance in bright light?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

### HEARING

Does your child respond to sounds even when the source is not within his sight, e.g. calling of his name, ringing of the telephone?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

### DEVELOPMENTAL CHECKLIST (TO BE COMPLETED BY PARENTS)

Please tick "Yes"/"No"

#### Personal Social

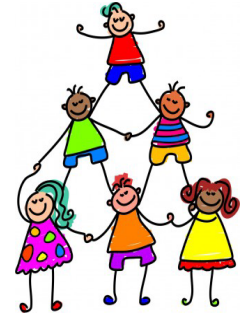
- |   | YES                      | NO                       | Age (mths)<br>when 90% achieve<br>the milestone |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 Your child can use a spoon to feed himself. He gets most of the food into his mouth, spilling little. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 22  |

# Can I Screen My Child for Autism?

- M-CHAT-R/F
  - Parents or professionals
  - 16-30 months
  - 20 questions
- Children with a positive screen may sometimes have other developmental delays



<https://for.sg/kkh-mchat-rf>





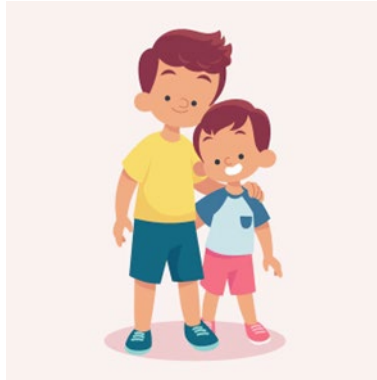
# Is My Child More Likely to Have Autism?



Children born prematurely  
(below 35 weeks) or with  
birth weight under 2.5 kg



Having certain  
genetic conditions



Siblings of  
children with autism



Certain medication use  
during pregnancy



Parents over 40 years old

# Referrals

- Avoid the 'wait and watch' approach
- Who to refer to?
  - Preschool children
    - KKH – Department of Child Development
    - NUH – Child Development Unit @ Jurong Medical Centre or Keat Hong
  - School-age children
    - IMH – Child Guidance Clinic

Adam has been seen at KKH DCD.

The DCD doctor thinks Adam probably has autism, and Adam has been referred for early intervention.



Image by jcomp on Freepik

Should we follow the doctor's recommendation?  
Does early intervention really help?



KK Women's and  
Children's Hospital  
SingHealth

It's ok, boys are slower than girls.

Just give him time, my son also only talked at 5 years old.

No need early intervention, just put him in preschool enough.

Why don't you let him watch phonics videos to teach him words?





College of Paediatrics & Child Health,  
Singapore

ABOUT US CHAPTER OF NEONATOLOGISTS CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION & TRAINING LECTURESHIP PUBLICATIONS USEFUL LINKS CONTACT US

## 2023 GUIDELINES ON AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

3 JUL 2023

COLLEGE OF PAEDIATRICS AND CHILD HEALTH, SINGAPORE (CPCHS)

2023 CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES ON AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The first Clinical Practice Guidelines on Autism Spectrum Disorder in Preschoolers was published in 2010 jointly by the Academy of Medicine and Ministry of Health, Singapore. These guidelines were retired in 2015, and the second edition of the Clinical Practice Guidelines on Autism Spectrum Disorder in Children and Adolescents is now available, commissioned by the Academy of Medicine, Singapore (College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Singapore (CPCHS)) in 2021.

The 2023 guidelines have been carefully developed following extensive and systematic review of the current research literature over the past 24 months by a 37-member workgroup of professionals working in various fields supporting children and adolescents on the autism spectrum in Singapore, followed by an external review and public consultation exercise conducted from 15 May to 15 June 2023. The 2023 guidelines have also been expanded to include older children and adolescents, with new/expanded topics on Co-occurring Conditions, Education and Transition, Follow-up and Prognosis, and Professional Training.

Please note that the Main Guideline Document, Executive Summary and Supplemental documents have been written for professional use, and that the accompanying Lay Version has been written for parents and other caregivers.

[Main Guideline Document](#)

[Supplement 1: Evidence Matrices \(contains detailed evidence supporting the Recommendations and Good Practice Points in the main guideline document\)](#)

[Supplement 2: Public Consultation and External Reviews](#)

[Executive Summary of Recommendations](#)

[Lay Version](#)



<https://for.sg/2023-cpg-on-asd-in-child-adolescents>

CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES

# AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

2<sup>nd</sup> EDITION (2023)



ACADEMY OF MEDICINE  
SINGAPORE



COLLEGE OF PAEDIATRICS AND CHILD  
HEALTH, SINGAPORE



KK Women's and  
Children's Hospital  
SingHealth

It's ok, boys are

Just give him  
time, my son

## SECTION 5: WHAT ARE THE EVIDENCE-BASED TREATMENTS FOR AUTISM?

Early diagnosis and intervention can make a big difference to many children on the autism spectrum by improving their skills and participation, helping them to be more independent and have a better quality of life.

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put him in preschool  
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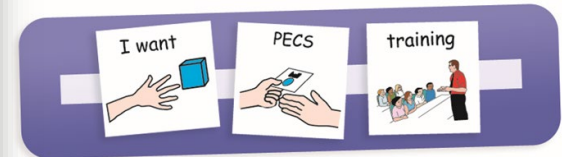
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(low income and minority), and therapy was delivered in school community settings by expert clinicians. Results indicated that the participants made significant progress regardless of intervention approach: 6 months gain in standardized language scores over 6 months, but slower progress during the period after therapy ended. Children

## Spoken language outcomes in limited language preschoolers with autism and global developmental delay: RCT of early intervention approaches

Connie Kasari<sup>1</sup> | Stephanie Shire<sup>2</sup> | Wendy Shih<sup>1</sup> | Rebecca Landa<sup>3,4</sup> |  
Lynne Levato<sup>5</sup> | Tristram Smith<sup>5</sup>

No need early  
intervention, just  
put him in preschool  
enough.





## The Ministry of Health advisory "Guidance on Screen Use for Children" recommends:

<18 mo



**No screen time**

except for  
video-calling

18 mo to 6yrs



**<1 hr screen  
time daily**

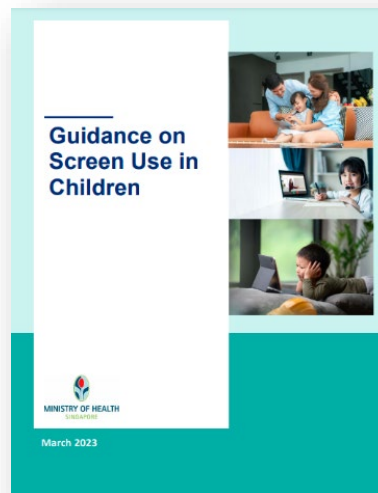
co-viewing preferred, choose  
interactive & educational content

7-12 yrs



**Make a Collaborative  
Screen Use Plan**

appropriate balance between  
screen use and other  
age-appropriate activities



<https://for.sg/screen-time-poster>

Why don't you let  
him watch phonics  
videos to teach him  
words?



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Children's Hospital  
SingHealth

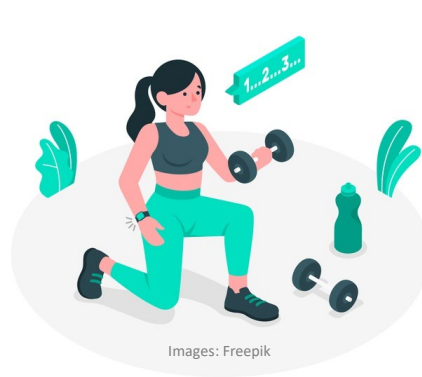
# Singapore Integrated 24-hour Activity Guidelines



COLLEGE OF PAEDIATRICS &  
CHILD HEALTH SINGAPORE



60 mins per day of  
moderate-to-  
vigorous physical  
activity



Images: Freepik

Muscle and bone  
strengthening  
exercises 3x per  
week



Light physical  
activities throughout  
the day

Outdoor play whenever possible  
Avoid prolonged sitting



<https://for.sg/activity-guidelines-for-early-childhood>

# Singapore Integrated 24-hour Activity Guidelines



COLLEGE OF PAEDIATRICS &  
CHILD HEALTH SINGAPORE



Images: Freepik

## Limit recreational screen time

Less than 2 hours per day

Less than 1 hour for preschoolers

None for under 18 month olds



designed by freepik

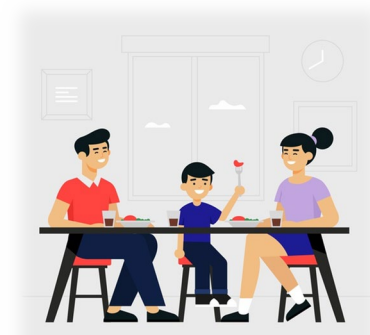
## Regular sleep

Primary school 9 hours

Secondary school 8 hours  
18 years and above at least  
7 hours

No screen use at bedtime

No screen devices in  
bedrooms



designed by freepik

## Good eating habits

Healthy meals


Eating together as a family  
and having regular  
mealtimes

No screen use at mealtimes



KK Women's and  
Children's Hospital  
SingHealth

# Take Home Messages

- Autism has a very wide spectrum of presentation
  - Remember Early Signs 
  - Use M-CHAT-R/F
  - Especially for children with higher chance of having autism
- Seek help and intervention early
- Establish healthy daily routines at home