

ASD—What Are Early Signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may show developmental differences throughout their infancy, especially in social and language skills. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about the early signs of ASD.

Families may notice delays in spoken language or differences in interaction with peers. However, because children with ASD usually sit, crawl, and walk on time, subtler differences in the development of gestures (pointing), pretend play, and social language often go unnoticed by families and doctors.

Delay in or Lack of Joint Attention

One of the most important developmental differences between children with ASD and children without ASD is a delay in or lack of joint attention. Delays in joint attention skills are found in most children with ASD. *Joint attention* is looking back and forth between an object or event and another person and connecting with that person. It is a building block for later social and communication skills. Engaging in many back-and-forth social interactions, such as exchanging a lot of emotional expressions, sounds, and other gestures, is called *reciprocal social interaction*.

Stages of Joint Attention

There are several stages of joint attention. Children with ASD usually show delays or absent social communication skills at every stage. For example, children typically use and understand gestures at the following times:

- By 12 months of age. Most children can immediately look in the direction of an object a parent is pointing at. They will then look back at the parent and mimic the parent's expression, usually a smile. Children with ASD may appear to ignore the parent. This can cause parents to worry about their child's hearing.
- By 15 months of age. Most children can point to out-of-reach objects that they want. A child with ASD may instead take a parent's hand and lead the parent to the object without making much, if any, eye contact. Sometimes the child may even place the parent's hand onto the object itself.
- By 18 months of age. Most children point at objects they find interesting. Children will look back and forth between an object and a parent to make sure the parent is tuned-in to what they are looking at. Children with ASD will often point to an object because they want a parent to get it for them, not because they want the parent to enjoy looking at the object with them.

Language Delays

Almost all children with ASD show delays in nonverbal communication and spoken language. They may have words they use to label things but not to request things. They may use words for objects before using words for people or family members. Most young children go through a phase when they repeat what they hear. Children with ASD may repeat what they hear for a longer period and may repeat dialogue from movies or conversations with the tone of voice they heard them in. This is called *parroting* or *echoing*. Some children later diagnosed with ASD will seem to have met language

milestones during the toddler years, but their use of language may be unusual. For example, they may talk more like an adult than a toddler.

Regression in Developmental Milestones

About 25% of children later diagnosed with ASD may develop some language that they suddenly or gradually stop using between the ages of 15 and 24 months. They might also become more socially withdrawn. This change is called a *regression in skills*.

Visit [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.HealthyChildren.org) for more information.

Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics patient education booklet, *Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*.

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