

A National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders

About the Guideline

For parents and caregivers of children undergoing an assessment

Australia's first *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders* was launched in 2018.

The Guideline is the first unified approach to the assessment and diagnosis of autism in Australia. It aims to make the process for diagnosing autism much clearer, providing greater:

- **equity** in access to an assessment
- **transparency** and **confidence** in the decision-making process
- a clearly defined **pathway** to support needs.

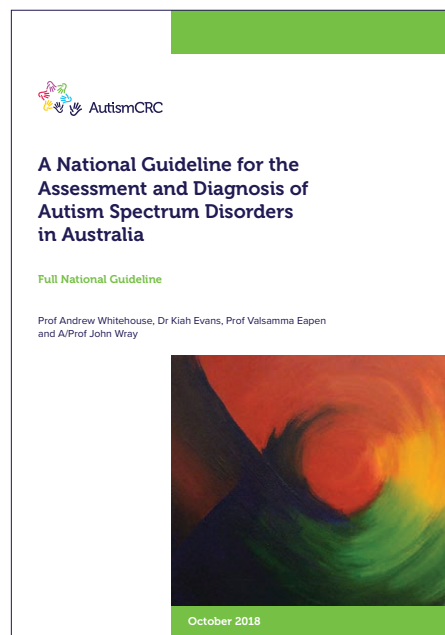
The Guideline was developed after comprehensive research, and close consultation with expert health professionals and the autism community.

The recommendations in the Guideline are approved as best-practice health care.

About the Guideline

The Guideline does not redefine, or change the specific criteria for a diagnosis of autism, but outlines a clear, step-by-step process for assessment.

This will help health professionals to determine your child's support needs, and whether they meet the criteria for a diagnosis.



The Guideline emphasises the importance of listening to individuals and their families about the impact of characteristics and behaviours on family life. The needs and priorities of your child and family are critical considerations at each step.

The Guideline also recommends a strengths-focused approach. This means that identifying your child's strengths, skills, interests, resources and support systems, and those of their caregivers, is as important as identifying any challenges.

Autism diagnosis

There is no biological test – such as a blood test or scan – for autism. It is usually diagnosed by trained health professionals, who observe certain characteristics such as social communication, behaviours and intense or focused interests.

Primary healthcare providers (such as GPs, nurses, allied health professionals or Aboriginal health workers) are usually the first point of contact. They will begin the process by referring your child to a health professional who has experience in assessing neurodevelopmental conditions.

The signs and behaviours that characterise autism are often present before three years of age, but may first become apparent during the school years or later in life. Autism can vary widely in nature and impact, and may be accompanied by mental and physical health problems.

The assessment process

After being referred to a health professional with expertise in autism diagnosis, the Guideline recommends a **Comprehensive Needs Assessment**.

This assessment has two parts

1. *An Assessment of Functioning* – this involves obtaining a detailed understanding of your child's abilities, and any support needs they might have, across a broad range of areas. These areas include cognitive abilities, speech and language function, daily living skills, friendships and school.
2. *A Medical Evaluation* – this involves a physical examination and other medical tests to understand if there could be medical causes for the behaviours or characteristics that prompted the referral.

Depending on you and your child's needs, your child may be immediately referred to various support services.

If there is still uncertainty about an autism diagnosis, the Guideline recommends a **Diagnostic Evaluation**. This will establish whether your child's behaviour is consistent with autism, or another condition.

This may involve an interview with your child and their caregivers, and professional observation and assessment of the signs and behaviours that your child displays.

The Diagnostic Evaluation may be conducted by one health professional alone, or a team of health professionals who make a consensus diagnostic decision together. The professionals who are involved will depend on a range of factors, such as the type or complexity of the characteristics your child displays, and any other conditions they may have.

After an assessment

After the assessment, the Guideline recommends that the health professionals involved provide you with a written report, explained to you, and if appropriate your child, in a meeting.

The report will summarise the information collected during the assessment and what this information means. It will also explain any decisions that have been made about a diagnosis, and suggest next steps for accessing support services.

More information

You can [download the Guideline recommendations](https://autismcrc.com.au/national-guideline) from autismcrc.com.au/national-guideline

What to expect – in summary

If your child has been referred for an assessment, you should expect:

- ✓ A timely and thorough assessment.
- ✓ Consideration of your child's unique needs, strengths and resources.
- ✓ Prompt referral to support services based on your child's functioning and needs.
- ✓ A report that summarises the assessment findings and diagnostic decision, explained in person by an expert health professional.



Whitehouse AJO, Evans K, Eapen V, Wray J. A national guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders in Australia. Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism, Brisbane, 2018.



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

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