Autism and ADHD in Children

What is autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects communication, social interaction, behaviour, thinking processes, and sensory processing.

Autistic children experience the world very differently to typically developing children. They may find some sensory input overwhelming, unpleasant, or painful; they may have difficulty interacting with other people, or become easily frustrated with others; they may have deep interests that they are capable of focussing on for much longer than a typically developing child; and they may use movements like hand flapping or rocking to express and regulate their feelings.

What is ADHD?

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects social interaction, behaviour, and thinking processes (particularly around focus and attention).
ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which can be misleading – children with ADHD don't have a deficit in attention; instead, they have difficulty regulating their attention. Children with ADHD have an interest-based nervous system that makes it very easy to focus their attention on new, interesting or challenging things, and very difficult or impossible to focus their attention on tasks that are boring, repetitive, or easy. Children with ADHD may be impulsive; they may say or do inappropriate things before they can manage to stop themselves; they may have difficulty regulating their emotions and be especially sensitive to rejection; and they may have difficulty with planning and organising.

Similarities between autism and ADHD

Hyperfocus

Both autistic children and children with ADHD often have the ability to focus on a particular interest, fascination or passion much more deeply and/or for longer periods of time than typically developing children. Both may have difficulty switching tasks.

Sensory sensitivity

Autistic children often have multiple sensory sensitivities – light, sound, textures, smells, etc. They can be easily distracted or distressed by sensory input that doesn't seem to affect typically developing children. Children with ADHD can have a similar reaction to background noise or visually stimulating environments, being easily distracted by new or interesting sensory input.

Children with ADHD (and some autistic children) often seek out new or interesting sensory input – they might love bright or noisy environments, or want to touch everything around them. If your child is autistic and has ADHD, they may experience distress because their ADHD is telling them to seek out sensory input at the same time as their autistic sensory sensitivity is telling them to avoid it.

Emotional regulation

Both autistic children and children with ADHD can struggle to regulate their emotions – this can look like an emotional reaction out of proportion with what happened, or like going from 0 to 100 very quickly. In both cases, this is often because these children are dealing with a lot more stress than their typically developing peers, and the small thing that seems to set off a disproportionate reaction is actually just the last thing in a long series of stressful things that has pushed them over the edge.

Constantly moving and fidgeting

Children with ADHD need extra stimulation in order to focus, and can find it deeply unpleasant or even painful to be under-stimulated. Older children will often move around or fidget to help themselves pay attention; younger children may make loud noises, roll around the floor, or try to leave the room if they are under-stimulated.

Autistic children use repeated motions called stims for a huge variety of functions, including identifying, expressing and regulating their emotions, meeting sensory needs, orienting themselves and their bodies, and helping to interpret their physical sensations. The reasons behind autistic children's movements and those of children with ADHD are different, but the movements themselves can look very similar.

Trouble fitting in with peers

Children with ADHD struggle with impulse control, often interrupting their peers or intruding on conversations before they're able to stop themselves. Combined with emotional regulation difficulties, this can lead to typically developing children excluding or bullying children with ADHD.

Autistic children have communication differences that make interacting with peers difficult and frustrating. Typically developing children often don't have the patience or ability to understand and empathise with these differences; like children with ADHD, autistic children are often excluded or bullied by their peers.

Talking a lot, interrupting and/or monologuing

Children with ADHD commonly have racing thoughts, and often interrupt because they are excited about contributing to a conversation; they can also find it difficult or impossible to remember what they were going to say if they don't get it out immediately. This can lead to a child with ADHD dominating a conversation and unintentionally frustrating those they're talking to.

Autistic children often don't pick up on non-verbal cues that communicate whose turn it is to speak, or whether other people are bored or upset by what they're saying. They also often have deep interests and fascinations that they love talking about, and want to bond with others by sharing information.

Executive function

Both neurotypes can struggle with executive function – planning, organising, prioritising, and getting started on tasks. This can affect schoolwork and structured activities, but also tasks like getting out of bed in the morning, personal hygiene, leaving the house with all the required things, etc.

Differences between autism and ADHD

Both neurotypes find it easier to focus on things that interest them, but children with ADHD find it more difficult to focus on things that don't, to the point where being asked to pay attention to something that isn't interesting can be deeply unpleasant or painful.

Autistic special interests tend to last longer than ADHD ones; a child with ADHD may switch between deep fascinations every few weeks, whereas an autistic child is more likely to be fascinated with the same thing for years.

Both neurotypes can be easily distracted by noise and visual stimulation; this can go further with autistic children, who may find too much sensory input overwhelming or painful.

In older children, fidgets and stims can look different between the two neurotypes. ADHD stims tend to look more like typical fidgets - playing with objects, fiddling with clothes or hair, drumming fingers; autistic stims can look like hand flapping, rocking back and forth, staring at objects, or flicking fingers in front of their eyes.

Autistic children have communication differences that children with ADHD don't. This can become clearer as children get older - autistic children have difficulty using and picking up on non-verbal communication (facial expressions, body language, tone of voice) where children with ADHD may still be socially awkward or have trouble fitting in, but are able to use and understand non-verbal communication. Autistic children may also start speaking late, or not speak at all and rely on alternative communication; these language differences are not associated with ADHD.

Autistic children may have difficulties with their motor skills - they may seem clumsy, or have difficulty with precision tasks like pointing to an object. ADHD does not affect motor skills.

Autistic children often find set plans and routines very helpful, and may become upset when their routine changes or something out of the ordinary happens. Children with ADHD are more likely to love surprises and spontaneity, and to find sticking to a routine or schedule impossible.

Other resources for parents of children with ADHD

www.adhd.org.nz
www.parent2parent.org.nz
neuroclastic.com/autism-and-adhd-neurological-cousins
adhdsorted.com
www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/resources

For more information about autism, head to autismnz.org.nz, or contact one of our Outreach team – you can find your local Outreach Coordinator at autismnz.org.nz/support-from-us

This resource was written by an autistic author and an AuDHD (autistic and ADHD) author (2023).