

What is autism?

Signs to look for in yourself

- You feel like you are wearing a mask or playing a character when you interact with other people. You are constantly on the alert, making sure that you don't make any social mistakes, or get into trouble.
- You seem to be frequently in trouble with peers or adults, often for reasons you don't understand or couldn't anticipate. It might feel like there is a list of social rules that everyone else got a copy of, and you're constantly breaking them because you don't know they're there.
- Sensory input (bright lights, loud noises, odd textures, etc.) seems to be more intense for you than for other people. You might be able to hear lights or other electronics buzzing; you might find it hard to see without sunglasses on sunny days; or you might be a picky eater because certain tastes and textures are unbearable.
- You need to fidget or move around a lot, especially when you're feeling strong emotions. You might have particular movements that help you (like rocking back and forth, playing with your hands or a fidget toy, or repeating a phrase under your breath). You might also have replacement movements, like clenching particular muscles or curling your toes inside your shoes, that other people can't see.
- Your interests are deeper and less broad than other people's. You might have one or two particular interests that you can talk about for hours. It's also common to feel that everyone around you is interested in boring things you have no patience for.

- Everything suddenly got harder around intermediate or high school. Adolescence comes with new social rules and systems that autistic people find hard to navigate, as well as puberty introducing new sensory input that can be difficult to deal with. It's not uncommon for autistic people to have a relatively easy childhood, and then suddenly find that they're not coping and need new accommodations once adolescence hits.

If these signs sound familiar, you may want to talk to a parent or another trusted adult about the possibility that you might be autistic. You can also check out a more detailed resource on autistic traits [here](#), or have a go at some of the screening tools here: <https://embrace-autism.com/>

Signs to look for in your teenager

- Your teenager may be having a tough time socially. Autistic people have communication differences that can go unnoticed (or just seem a bit quirky) in childhood, and then find that their peers' tolerance for their differences has disappeared once they hit adolescence. Your teenager might only have a few friends, have one particular best friend and not seem to spend time with anyone else, or prefer to spend their time alone.
- Autistic people experience sensory input differently, often more intensely. Your teenager might have always been sensitive to things like bright lights, odd textures, and loud noises, but adding in the sensory challenges of puberty might make these other sensory annoyances suddenly intolerable. They might also have a hard time with new hygiene and bodily requirements, like wearing deodorant or dealing with periods.
- Your teenager might be fascinated or obsessed by one or two topics, and have little or no interest in anything else. They might not be interested in keeping up with whatever their peers are into, and prefer to spend time on their own interests.

- Your teenager might struggle with executive functioning. Executive functioning is the ability to plan out tasks and organise yourself. Getting out the door on time; remembering all the items you need for the day; getting started on tasks like homework; remembering all the steps in a new hygiene routine; and prioritising tasks are all part of executive functioning. Autistic people often struggle with executive functioning, and the sudden increase in expectations in this area once children hit high school can be very stressful.
- Everything suddenly got harder around the start of adolescence. Navigating new social rules, dealing with sometimes upsetting changes to their body, and handling the transition to a new school with new expectations and routines can lead to meltdowns, shutting down and withdrawing from family, or other expressions of distress. It's normal for all teenagers to experience mood swings, intense emotions, and what seem like overreactions for no apparent reason, but if they seem to be causing your teenager significant distress or they seem to be set off by sensory issues, miscommunications and social difficulties with peers, or struggles with executive functioning, it could be a sign that there's something else going on.

If these signs sound familiar, you may want to talk to your teenager about the possibility that they are autistic. You can also check out a more detailed resource on autistic traits [here](#), go through some of the screeners [here](#) with your teenager, or talk to one of Autism New Zealand's Outreach Coordinators – you can find a list of Outreach Coordinators by region [here](#).