



## Autism Services in South Staffordshire

The professionals' guide to making referrals



MIDLANDS PSYCHOLOGY

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## About this booklet

The guidance in this booklet explains HOW you can make a referral and WHY we ask for certain information from you.

## About Midlands Psychology Autism Services

The Autism Service provides specialist assessment and interventions to children and young people either with an existing diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or where there are concerns that autism may be present.

We work with children and young people aged 0-18 years who are registered with a South Staffordshire GP. Our services are available to children with and without Learning Disabilities.



## What is autism?

Autism is a developmental condition characterised by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction across contexts that cannot be accounted for by general developmental delays. In addition, there are restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities that limit and significantly impair everyday functioning.

Autism is what is known as a 'spectrum' condition. This means that all people with autism share similar difficulties, but are affected in different ways by their condition. Children who are referred for an autism assessment must have difficulties in all core areas.

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## What information should I include in my referral for assessment?

Referrals are accepted for children where an Autism Spectrum Condition is the likely cause of their difficulties. This means that other much more common problems must be ruled out. This ensures that children who are unlikely to have autism do not go through lengthy and unnecessary assessment with a service that is not appropriate for them.

We do not expect referrers to conduct their own assessment of autism. In fact, this can be unhelpful as a 'first step' as it can give a limited picture of the child that focuses only on specific 'autism-like' areas of functioning.

It is primarily your own clinical judgement and objective observations of the child and family that we are seeking.



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## NICE guidance referral criteria

We base our referral criteria on NICE guidelines. These state that referrers should provide evidence of their assessment of the child made during a recent consultation attended by the child.

Please include in your referral letter the following information:

- reported information from parents, carers and professionals about signs and/or symptoms of concern
- referrer's own observations of the signs and/or symptoms
- antenatal and perinatal history
- developmental milestones
- factors associated with an increased prevalence of autism, e.g. family history of autism
- relevant medical history and investigations
- information from previous assessments

Some children may have additional difficulties to the core areas, such as problems with motor functioning and/or sensory processing. These are common to children with autism but are not seen in all children with autism, so they are not essential for referral, and not sufficient on their own.

Please include information in your referral letter that describes:

- Possible autism "traits"
- Pervasiveness across settings
- Onset and duration
- How factors other than autism have been taken into consideration

More information about these subjects is given on the following pages.

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## Autism “traits”

We can only accept referrals of children who present with difficulties in ALL of the core areas associated with autism spectrum condition, that is:

- social communication
- social interaction
- social imagination

Evidence of impairment across all three areas should be included in your referral.

## Pervasiveness

As a developmental disorder, autism is pervasive. There should be evidence to show that this is not exclusively a home or school-based problem and that the difficulties are apparent across contexts.

## Onset and duration

Similarly, autism is a lifelong condition. There must be evidence to show that difficulties are longstanding. Sometimes, difficulties are not evident until demands on a child exceed their capacity. It is usual for someone to have raised concerns before then, even if these were subtle or well managed. Autism does not have a sudden onset. If there is a sudden onset of difficulties, other factors should be explored as there may be an alternative psychological or medical explanation.

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## Other factors

For all referrals, other potential causative factors should be considered and ruled out. For this reason, referrals should only be made after a generic assessment has been performed in order to rule out any medical, socio-environmental or psychological factors that might account for the child or young person's difficulties.

There are a number of common mental health problems which may be inadvertently interpreted as signs of Autism. These include attachment disorders arising from early trauma such as abuse or neglect, anxiety problems, including social anxiety or obsessive-compulsive fears or rituals, depression and bereavement. Similarly, speech and language difficulties or a learning disability may be incorrectly interpreted as signs of Autism.

Children who have complex histories involving repeated broken attachments, difficult and stressful life events and parents who struggle with their parenting role, their own mental health issues and/ or drug and alcohol problems often present with behaviours that can raise concerns. It is important that in these cases, these factors are carefully considered as a potential explanation for the child's presentation and addressed rather than referring directly to the autism service.



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## If you're unsure

If you have concerns about development or behaviour but are not sure whether the signs and/or symptoms suggest autism, consider:

- consulting a member of the autism team who can provide advice to help you decide if a referral to the autism team is necessary
- referring to another service. That service can then refer to the autism team if necessary.

If a concern about possible autism has been raised but there are no signs, symptoms or other reasons to suspect autism, use professional judgment to decide what to do next.





A bit about us...

## Midlands Psychology is a Social Enterprise

We are a not-for-profit service, whose aim is to work with service users to provide local services according to need.

We believe in placing the family at the centre of everything we do and work in close partnership with our service users, who have a meaningful and direct say in how services are provided.

We re-invest surplus monies to develop more services and facilities for those who use them.

We use local goods and suppliers and promote Staffordshire wherever we can.

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