

Autism Spectrum Disorder: recognition, referral and diagnosis for pre-school children

What is the pre-school pathway?

The aim of the pre-school pathway is to provide a coordinated diagnostic process for pre-school children.

Recognition

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) develop at a different rate and may not develop skills in the same order as typically developing children.

If you have concerns about your child's development please contact your health visitor or GP who will discuss with you whether your child should be referred for an assessment.

Diagnostic assessment

Diagnostic assessment is available for children aged between 2 years 6 months and 4 years 10 months.

The assessment will take place over three phases. Each phase may take one or more appointments depending upon the complexity of your child's presentation.

Phase one

In phase one, you and your child will be seen by a paediatrician who will compile a detailed case history, and conduct a physical examination. This may include a modified autism diagnostic interview and a detailed developmental assessment. The paediatrician may invite other professionals who are involved with your child's care to contribute to and support the assessment.

Phase two

In phase two a specialist speech and language therapist will assess your child at home and in one other setting. This will be a combination of formal and informal assessments and may take several appointments.

Phase three

In phase three you will be invited to attend a joint communication clinic to discuss the findings of the assessments, and if appropriate a diagnosis will be given. Additional services such as occupational therapy may be involved at this stage. In some cases, particularly where the child is under three years old, the initial diagnosis may need to be placed under review, or in a small number of cases referred for a second opinion.

Post diagnosis

If your child is diagnosed with ASD you will be provided with an information pack detailing local and national support services. Your child will be offered the opportunity to attend the Early Bird Parent Programme run jointly by the home visiting educational service for preschool children and speech and language therapists. This is a National Autism Society programme aimed to empower and help parents/carers to support their child's social communication and appropriate behaviour in their natural environment.