

Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are used interchangeably to describe a group of complex disorders of brain development that impact how people communicate, interact, and behave.<sup>1</sup> **Behaviors associated with ASD can be evident in children prior to two years old, however most signs and symptoms begin to appear between 2-3 years old.**<sup>2</sup> Therefore, early intervention services are crucial, as they are more effective when provided early in life.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, early diagnosis and intervention for autism have long-term positive effects on symptoms and skills.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, accessing early intervention and autism services can be difficult, with barriers including the availability of qualified and adequately trained professionals, the lack of transportation, and gaps in healthcare coverage.



## Diagnosing Autism Spectrum Disorder

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) is the primary tool for diagnosis of ASD. In order for a child to be diagnosed with ASD, the DSM-5 requires that they demonstrate a combination of:<sup>5</sup>

### Persistent deficits in social communications and interactions:

- Ability to engage in social interactions between two or more people
- Nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction
- Developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

AND

### Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviors, interest, and activities:

- Repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech
- Insistence on sameness; inflexible adherence to routines
- Highly restricted, abnormally intense, and fixated interests
- Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input; unusual interest in sensory aspect of environment

## Autism and Co-Occurring Conditions

Autism is often associated with other intellectual delays or structural/language disorders. Additionally, many individuals with autism also experience symptoms of another mental health diagnosis. For example, **70% of individual with autism may have one additional mental diagnosis, and 40% may experience two or more combined mental diagnoses.** Some common co-occurring diagnoses include: ADHD, anxiety, depression, development and coordination disorders, and learning disorders.<sup>6</sup>

## Autism Spectrum Disorder in Georgia



**66,966** children, ages 3-17, were diagnosed with autism in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

### Factors related to apparent increase in prevalence:<sup>8</sup>

- Improved diagnosis criteria
- Environmental influences, such as parental age at conception, prematurity, and birth weight
- Increased awareness and earlier screenings

# Behavioral Analysts in Georgia<sup>9</sup>

Applied Behavior Analysis is an evidence-based therapy used for people with autism and other developmental disorders that addresses language and communication, attention and memory, and behavior concerns.<sup>10</sup>

Certification	Doctoral (BCBA)	Master/Graduate (BCBA)	Bachelor (BCaBA)	RBT	Total
Statewide Count	89	1,429	72	6,200	7,790

**BCBA:** Board Certified Behavior Analyst

**BCaBA:** Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst

**RBT:** Registered Behavior Technician

## Stay Tuned

Voices, along with various community partners and state agencies, is committed to supporting children and families access autism services. Therefore, Voices is leading a systems evaluation to determine how to increase access to autism early intervention services, diagnosis channels, and resources. We all look forward to sharing our findings with you soon!

## Recommendations

- Increase workforce capacity to serve, and availability crisis services and supports for, individuals with dual diagnoses (e.g., behavioral health disorder and intellectual/developmental disability).
- Require public and private insurers to allow ABA therapy upon autism diagnosis from primary care physician or child psychiatrist while waiting for a psychological evaluation.
- Develop a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) program within the Technical College System of Georgia to help meet the state's need for a larger autism and behavioral health workforce.
- Review and, if necessary, strengthen policies, procedures, state licensing provisions and quality monitoring of residential treatment and respite care for children and youth with behavioral health conditions, including serious emotional disturbance, substance use disorders, and autism.
- Assess gaps in coordination of services through Babies Can't Wait (Department of Public Health) and the Preschool Special Education Program (Georgia Department of Education), then structure and fund programs adequately.
- Encourage schools to partner with community providers of autism services to increase availability of supports in academic settings.
- Promote early identification educational opportunities for new and existing child care workforce members to better serve infants and young children aged 0-4 and their caregivers.



## References for Autism Spectrum Disorder

Suggested citation: Voices for Georgia's Children. (2023). Fact Sheet: Autism Spectrum Disorder. Voices for Georgia's Children. <https://adobe.ly/3uDtWtR>.

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