

THE AUTISM SPECTRUM IN YOUTH

This guide describes the special characteristics related to the autism spectrum and how they affect the behaviour of youngsters on the spectrum as they approach an age associated with many changes.



THE AUTISM SPECTRUM – WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

The autism spectrum is an inborn trait that manifests uniquely in the way people on the autism spectrum sense and experience the surrounding world and how they communicate and interact with others.

People on the autism spectrum have a number of strengths. Many of them have a good ability to concentrate and an eye for detail, the ability to spot mistakes and solve even highly complex problems. They also have a strong sense of justice and a strong adherence to rules. Some of them may have intense interests and these may be associated with extraordinary talent.

However, people on the spectrum also exhibit various degrees of uniquely manifested difficulties in executive functioning, rigid thinking and behaviour and challenges in social interaction. Many people on the spectrum react to sensory stimuli in unusual ways, due to which they may experience sensory overload. They also share a higher sensitivity to stress. About 1–1.2% of the population is on the autism spectrum. Autism has been more commonly diagnosed in boys than in girls. There may be several reasons for this, such as the narrow diagnostic criteria that have been used and the fact that the autism spectrum manifests differently in girls.

As part of the revision of the diagnostic criteria for autism, the ICD-11 revision of the International Classification of Diseases will replace ICD-10, and instead of separate diagnoses (autism, Asperger's syndrome, atypical autism, disintegrative developmental disorder) the single diagnosis of "autism spectrum disorder" (ASD) will be used.

What causes autism?

Autism is a neurobiological developmental disorder in the brain with multiple underlying causes that affect brain activity. The causes include both genetic and environmental factors. The causes of autism are not yet fully understood and many of the underlying factors remain unknown. Autism is a lifelong condition.

www.askelakuisuuteen.fi/en/the-autism-spectrum

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF AUTISM?

INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION

Young people on the autism spectrum may interact with others in unconventional ways. They may find it harder to express their feelings and understand the feelings of others and to imagine various situations beyond their immediate sphere of experiences. They may have difficulties putting themselves in someone else's shoes. As a result, making friends and maintaining friendships is often a challenge.

Autism is typically associated with varying degrees of difficulty in understanding and using language and in interpreting gestures and expressions. Young autistic people may understand language and interpret spoken language literally. Their habit of responding with expressions and gestures may differ from their neurotypical peers. They may be unable to understand slang, sarcasm or irony and various figures of speech. They may occasionally struggle to process something that has been said and remember it afterwards. Some of the young people on the spectrum have very limited speech or they do not speak at all. These individuals need

techniques that support and replace speech to help them communicate.

SENSORY CHARACTERISTICS

For young autistic people the information relayed by the senses and its interpretation is atypical and depends on the individual. The young person may be hypersensitive (over-sensitive) or hyposensitive (under-sensitive) to various sensations, such as light, touch, colours and sounds. For example, the background sounds in the environment, which rarely bother other people, may sound loud and disturbing. The sensory input from the environment can cause anxiety and even feel like physical pain.

The most recognizable sensitivities are related to sight and hearing. Hyper- and hyposensitivities can occur in the same sensory modalities and they can vary greatly at different times in life. They can even vary on a daily basis. Sensory characteristics are often heightened by feelings of tiredness or stress.

Young people can try to regulate and reduce the sensory flood and the resulting stress for example by using earplugs, sunglasses and various assistive devices and techniques to manage stress.



EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

Young people on the spectrum may have difficulties in executive functioning. The main challenges are related to structuring their actions, being flexible and having a short working memory. Young people may, for example, find it difficult to anticipate and plan the future or understand how long it will take to do something and in what order things should be done. It may be important to them to do things a certain way and in the usual order. Even the slightest change in routines, schedules and the environment can prevent or hinder progress and require the restructuring of things. Executive functioning difficulties are often misinterpreted as stubbornness, indifference or self-determination.

The executive functioning of young people can also be challenged by a difficulty to get started or stop doing something and, on the other hand, getting stuck on a specific action or approach. They may find it hard to remember instructions, orders and requests, particularly if many are given too quickly. In addition, the information relayed by the senses can reduce the young person's executive functioning skills.

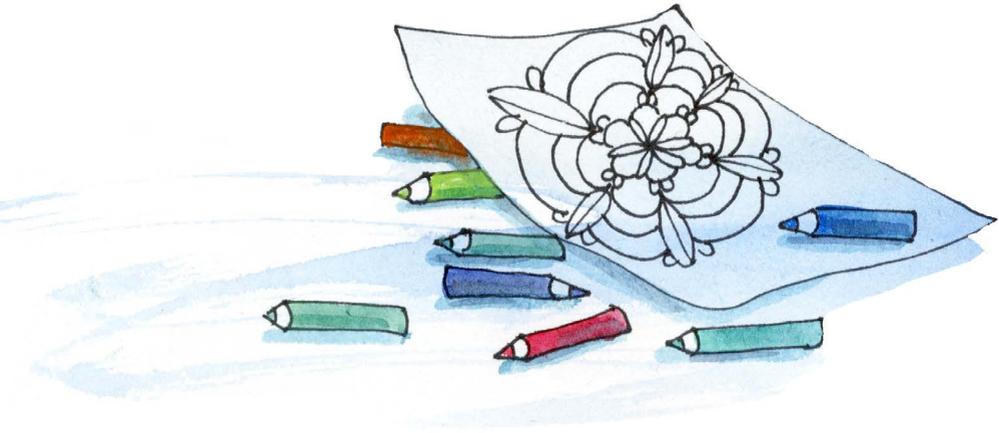
Difficulties in executive functioning can usually be resolved with adequate anticipation and the structuring of actions. A young autistic person perceives things differently from neurotypical young people. Executive functioning becomes easier for the young person when they know: **what will be done – when it will be done – where it will be done – with whom it will be done – how long it will last and what will happen afterwards.** Actions can be supported by creating written or illustrated instructions together with the young person to support progress, make sense of the environment and process changes.

SENSITIVITY TO STRESS

Each and every one of us, including young people on the spectrum, has their own way of reacting to factors that cause stress. The nervous system of young people becomes more easily overwhelmed due to autism. This can be triggered e.g. by a noisy environment, changing and unclear situations and social interaction. There are various types of factors that increase stress levels: brief, situation-specific things or events, such as sensory stimuli, or more long-term factors, such as changes in the environment. Various life events and external stimuli can further increase the stress levels of young autistic people. Since the stress level is often high to start with, the effect of a new stress factor is often greater than usual.

The difference between the basic stress level and chaos is typically much smaller in young autistic people than in young people with no ASD diagnosis. If this chaos threshold is crossed, it can cause visible challenging behaviour or, instead, passiveness and withdrawal, i.e., shutting down. It is important to realize that positive events and situations also increase stress levels.

Challenging behaviour is always associated with higher levels of stress. Lowering the stress level will therefore also reduce challenging behaviour. Such behaviour can be prevented by considering the special needs related to autism in terms of the senses, executive functioning, communication and interaction. The environment and approaches can also be made more autism-friendly. It is equally important to go through the events preceding the behaviour and its causes to learn a new way of behaving. Many factors that increase stress levels can be prepared for with anticipation and stress management and recovery techniques.



PUBERTY

Puberty is a challenging time for a young person and often for their family as well. The young person's mind and body are in a state of change, but often not in parallel. In addition to physical and mental changes, questions related to relationships and sexuality become more relevant, the pressure of school and studies increases and independence is looming ahead. In puberty, the emotional skills and thinking of the young person develop alongside physical changes. The young person's identity, or their understanding of their personal attributes and important issues, is being built. The onset of puberty and the related changes occur at a different time for every young person, typically earlier in girls than in boys. The onset of puberty has a wide range, between ages 8 and 13.

PUBERTY ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Puberty poses new challenges for young people on the spectrum. The purpose of puberty is to make young people ready to gradually separate from their parents and become independent. A young person with autism can be less prepared to face the challenges related to independence than their peers, and the process can take much longer. Questions related to mental well-being are often activated at this age. As the stress factors of puberty increase, even a young person who has previously seemed highly adaptable can feel anxiety and even get depressed.

Depression and anxiety are more common in young people on the autism spectrum than other young people of the same age. Stress is increased by the social demands of school, peer pressure, increased social awareness and fears about the future. The young person's own way of thinking and perceiving things also develops in puberty and any special traits are easier to notice. Challenges in social interaction may heighten the experience of being a social "failure". Peers seem to develop at a different pace, they may start dating for the first time and are interested in a wider variety of new activities. Young autistic people may continue to enjoy the hobbies and interests that are familiar to them from their childhood, and the gap between them and their neurotypical peers grows.

Social relationships in puberty are just as meaningful for autistic youngsters than for other young people. Through them, they gain experiences of how to control their emotions and respond to other people's emotions, cooperate and solve problems. Social relationships also improve their self-esteem and strengthen their sense of solidarity with their peers. The quantity, quality and form

of social relations may, however, differ from those of neurotypical young people. It may well be enough for a young autistic person to meet friends in hobbies, in school or online. Not everyone feels the need to separate from their childhood family either, and they are content with the relationships it provides.

Difficulties in school and studies often become more common in puberty. As the young person's studies progress, the learning environment becomes less structured and parents and teachers have less control over studying. Subjects that were previously easy may become harder and require more self-direction, such as planning and scheduling studies and assignments. Executive functioning develops slower in young people on the spectrum than in their neurotypical peers, which often adds to the challenges they face in school and during studies. Especially structuring and getting started with activities and working memory and flexibility cause problems.

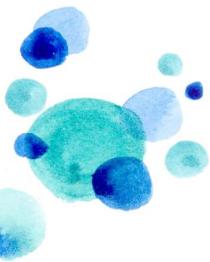
Puberty places many demands on the senses of young autistic people. Physical changes happening in your body can make your body look and feel strange and different. The sensory input caused by puberty increases stress levels, which in turn makes young people susceptible to sensory overload and may cause challenging behaviour.

Taking care of personal hygiene can also be difficult for some of the young people on the autism spectrum. The young person may not understand the importance of taking care of hygiene for the sake of social acceptance, or their sensory sensitivities and executive functioning challenges may prevent them from doing so.



LIFE TRANSITIONS

The changes in life, or life transitions, are often challenging to young autistic people and their family members. Life transitions include, in particular, moving out of your parents' house and into your own apartment and going on to further studies. These changes require a number of abilities, and the young person often needs time and support to learn and use these abilities. A stronger structure in everyday life and studies or support with



practising the skills needed to live independently and settle in a new environment may be necessary. The young person may also need support in building a positive self-image.

To succeed in these changes in life, the young person on the autism spectrum needs to identify their strengths and receive guidance with life management issues and how to utilize personal strengths. Good groundwork makes success more certain.

www.askelaikuisuuteen.fi/en/for-young-people/life-transitions/

STUDYING

Enough time should be reserved for planning further studies and getting ready for them, if possible. It is important for the young person to be involved in obtaining and receiving information about the various study opportunities and professions to find the field that suits them. This sense of inclusion increases the young person's motivation and enables anticipation, which is necessary for them. For help and support with planning, the young person on the autism spectrum should turn to his/her parents or other support network. Cooperation with both the old and the new educational institution and any support services the young person may need is essential to guarantee a successful transition.

What to study and where?

There are many opportunities after comprehensive school for continuing or supplementing your education. Studyinfo.fi, a service maintained by the Finnish National Agency for Education, contains information about a wide range of study options and admission criteria. You can also use the service to apply to study programmes.

10th grade

TELMA

LUVA

VALMA

Long study programmes of folk high schools

Vocational institution

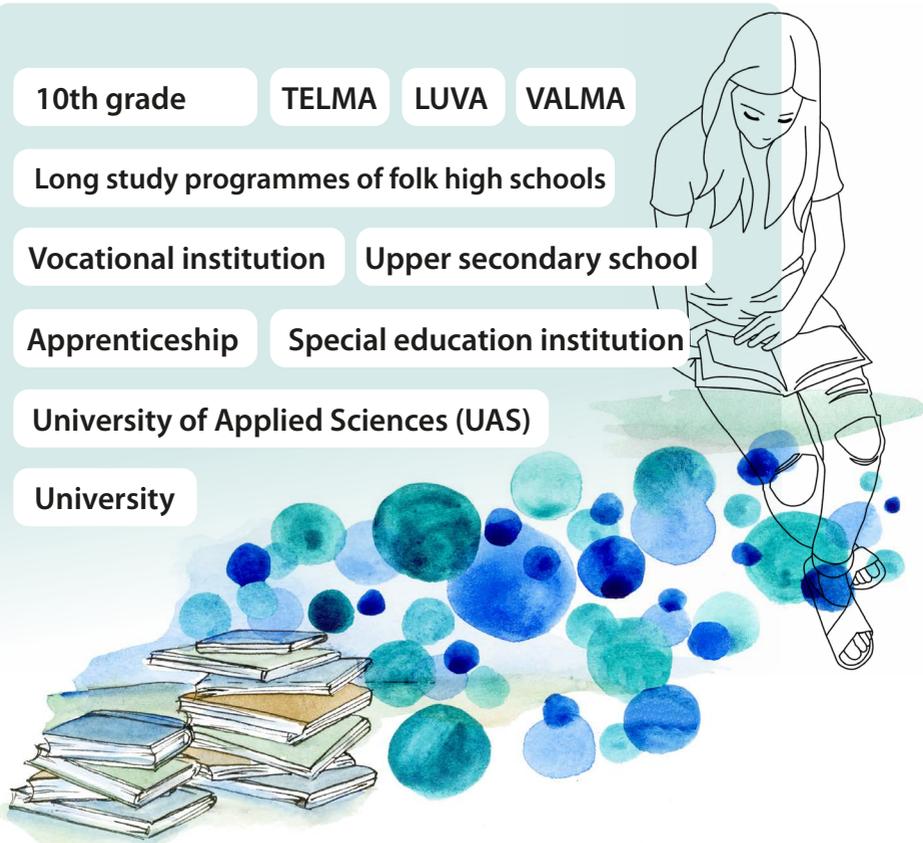
Upper secondary school

Apprenticeship

Special education institution

University of Applied Sciences (UAS)

University



www.askelaikuisuuteen.fi/en/further-studies/

Support and accessibility in studies

Everyone has the right to receive education and learn according to their abilities. This means taking the needs of different special needs groups into consideration in instruction, and ensuring the accessibility of the matriculation examination and entrance examinations, for example.

If you have special issues related to studying or the progress of your studies, you can obtain personal counselling at different points in your studies, in addition to individual forms of support and adjustments (such as your own, peaceful place to study, extra time or assistive devices when you need them) in learning situations. Individual support includes guidance counselling and student welfare services, such as the services of school social workers, study psychologists and the student health service. Failure to arrange reasonable adjustments can be regarded as discrimination.

Higher education and other institutions are responsible for the accessibility of student admissions and studies and can provide more information about their accessibility policy. During counselling related to the application procedure in particular, it is important for students to inquire about the available support during the application procedure and entrance exam and later at the start of studies. You should inform the educational institution about any obstacles and needs as early as possible so that the necessary support can be arranged. The practices of accessibility in studies and learning support are described in more detail at studyinfo.fi.

It is important to realize that students on the autism spectrum who receive suitable and adequate support often succeed in their

studies and enjoy them. They have particular strengths, such as strong dedication and focus on their chosen study subject, a high work ethic and a propensity to logical thinking. These qualities are useful not only to the individual, but also to wider society.

GAINING INDEPENDENCE

Youth brings about new challenges. The young person becomes independent and gradually separates from their parents. Independence often involves thinking about suitable housing options and moving out of your childhood home to live on your own. Young autistic people often go through this process later than their peers and the process itself takes more time. Young people on the spectrum may also be less prepared to face the demands related to independence. Identifying the young person's wishes and needs for support, anticipating changes and proceeding gradually will help the young person cope with the independence process.

A young person who needs special support can learn about different housing options and practise the skills needed to live independently through residential practice, for example in the residential home of a school or a housing unit. This practise can also be done in the form of an accommodation trial that can help the young person find a suitable form of housing. In addition to practising living skills, the young person can take part in activities aiming to promote basic knowledge and to support them as they go through the change. Cooperation with a support network helps you face new challenges and achieve a sense of security. Housing and the related support services should always be tailored individually.

If support with housing is necessary, planning should begin by first contacting the social services in the municipality. Housing services are provided to individuals who need help or support with housing or housing arrangements on special grounds.

VARIOUS HOUSING OPTIONS

- Living independently without support
- Living in a student village or shared accommodation
- Residential practice or independent living practice to practice and assess essential life skills and abilities
- Supported accommodation in your own apartment with the help of personal assistance or other services that support housing
- Supervised housing in a residential home or a group home with help and support available on a daily basis
- Assisted housing in a group home or an assisted living facility with help and support available 24/7

www.askelaisuuuteen.fi/en/life-transitions/gaining-independence/





The website Step to Adulthood

www.askelaikuisuuteen.fi/en/ is an information and material bank to support the life transitions of young people on the autism spectrum. The site contains versatile content related to further studies and becoming independent. The website contains information, testimonial writings and videos, gamified exercises, materials to download and links to other useful sites.



www.autismiliitto.fi