

Introduction

The first step if you suspect a child has Asperger's Syndrome or another Autistic Spectrum Disorder is to make a list of concerns. Using this list you can then start to look for the best explanation and which of the following paths best suits your situation. It is important to be open minded during the process as there is likely to be a raft of different possible reasons for your concerns. Part of the diagnostic process includes excluding alternative explanations and investigating whether you are dealing with one condition or more.

Below are some of the options open to you to get the diagnostic process started. Remember that the best answers and solutions are often found using a team of specialists.

Early Childhood Centre

Early childhood centre teachers can contact Group Special Education and ask for someone from the Early Intervention Team to come to the centre to observe the child. This must be done with the parent's consent. The person who comes will probably not be able to diagnose but should prove to be valuable as they will be able to suggest whether there are grounds to take things further, guide you as to where to go and will be able to offer advice and support. This support could include allocating resources to support the child at preschool and providing assistance with the transition to Primary School. If concerned, they will most likely refer on to a Paediatrician, Psychologist or Public Mental Health Facility (see below).

Advantages: Extra screening step, free, can provide or facilitate support and interventions.
Disadvantages: Can not diagnose, can be a waiting list.

Primary or Secondary School

Primary and secondary teachers have access to Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) Many of the RTLBs have had training on Autistic Spectrum Disorders. With the parent's permission they will come in and observe the child. They can then discuss their findings with you and suggest the next step. Once again they are likely to refer you on to a Paediatrician, Clinical Psychologist or Public Mental Health Facility (see below) but they provide an initial screening step and can make suggestions as to what can be done at school to help the child. They can provide the teacher with ideas for the classroom and sometimes one on one support for the child at their school.

Advantages: Extra screening step, free, can provide or facilitate support and interventions.
Disadvantages: Can not diagnose, not all are trained in Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

Public Child Health Facility (Child Development Team)

The government funds a small number of public facilities that bring together a range of specialists to diagnose and treat people with a range of mental health disorders. Autistic Spectrum Disorders fall under this umbrella and you can be referred to one of these centres (by RTLb, Group Special Education or paediatrician) for assessment. They are free but unfortunately tend to have very long waiting lists.

Advantages: Free, team of specialists, can diagnose.
Disadvantages: Often very long waiting lists.

Paediatrician

Those paediatricians with a special interest in the area will diagnose Asperger's Syndrome. Most will screen for other medical reasons for the signs you have noticed and then, if nothing else is found, will often refer you on to a Clinical Psychologist. Some, however, have little knowledge of Autistic Spectrum Disorders and may not refer you on further. If the child is of preschool age they should be seen by a paediatrician at some point during the diagnostic process to rule out other medical reasons and to check for associated medical conditions.

Another option is a Developmental Paediatrician. These doctors specialise in diagnosing developmental conditions.

Advantages: Can rule out other medical reasons (particularly in preschool aged children) and check for associated medical conditions. A few diagnose.

Disadvantages: Normal doctor's fees apply, many are not familiar with all aspects of Autistic Spectrum Disorders, some do not refer on.

Clinical Psychologist (Private)

Once again, some psychologists are particularly skilled in the area of Autistic Spectrum disorders while others are not. Make sure you do some research before choosing one. The psychologist can screen for a range of psychological / psychiatric disorders and make a diagnosis. They will most likely want the child to also be seen by a paediatrician if they are of preschool age. The psychologist can provide treatment for the child to help them with their social, cognitive and communication skills and general well being. Often they will also work with the parents around their own coping and parenting.

Advantages: Can diagnose, can provide a treatment/intervention program, fast process.

Disadvantages: Expensive (could be \$500+).

Other Specialists

There are other specialists that may be available to you. These specialists range from Educational Psychologists (whose focus is on the child's needs within the educational setting and classroom behaviour) to Autistic Spectrum Disorder Consultants. Who is available to you, and whether you can see them privately, depends largely on where you live. Generally, these specialists are involved more in the support of the child once they have gone through the diagnostic process. Some can diagnose but tend to have a very specialised field in which they can do so. Once the child has been assessed you can then look at the range of specialists in your area and decide which are best suited to assist the child.

Advantages: Very specialised.

Disadvantages: Usually used to support rather than diagnose due to their degree of specialisation, availability varies greatly depending on location.

GOOD LUCK!

