



**Autism
Society**
Massachusetts



GUIDE TO AUTISM SERVICES IN MASSACHUSETTS

Birth through 3 years old



Welcome

Welcome to the Autism Society of Massachusetts! We are honored to connect with you and support you on your journey. As an affiliate of the Autism Society of America, our mission is to create a world where everyone in the Autism community is connected to the resources they need to live fully.



We understand that every individual's experience with Autism is unique, and we are here to provide support, advocacy, education, and resources to individuals with Autism, their families, and professionals.

How We Can Help:

- Information and Referral
- Education & Training
- Safety Resources and Trainings
- Awareness & Advocacy
- Public Policy



You are not alone. Whether you are looking for guidance, community, or ways to get involved, the Autism Society of Massachusetts is here for you. Visit our website to explore our programs, events, and resources.

Learn more at www.autismsocietyma.org



With support and community,
The Autism Society of Massachusetts



WHAT IS AUTISM?



What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), hereafter referred to as Autism (which includes Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified [PDD-NOS]), is a complex, lifelong developmental condition that typically appears during early childhood and can impact a person's social skills, communication, relationships, and self-regulation. The Autism experience is different for everyone. It is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is often referred to as a “spectrum condition” that affects people differently and to varying degrees.

While there is currently no known single cause of Autism, early diagnosis helps a person receive resources that can support the choices and opportunities needed to live fully.

Screening & Diagnosis

Autism medical diagnosis is made by a psychologist, developmental pediatrician, or other specialized physician based on an assessment of symptoms and diagnostic tests. It is characterized in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5). This manual guides physicians in diagnosing Autism spectrum disorder according to a specific set of criterion.

A skilled practitioner can initiate the assessment, but the evaluation process may vary based on the professional conducting it, the individual's age, the severity of their needs, and the available local resources. A medical assessment for autism typically includes:

- A medical history of the mother's pregnancy
- Developmental milestones: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>
- Sensory challenges
- Medical illnesses, including ear infections and seizures
- Any family history of developmental disorders
- Any family history of genetic and metabolic disorders
- An assessment of cognitive functioning
- An assessment of language skills
- An Autism-specific observational test, interview or rating scale

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DIAGNOSIS



Diagnostic Tools

While there is not a single behavioral or communication test that can detect Autism, several Autism-specific tools are now being used for formal diagnosis. These include the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, Second Edition (ADOS™-2), the Autism Diagnostic Interview (ADI), the Screening Tool for Autism in Toddlers (STAT), the Childhood Autism Rating Scales (CARS), and the Tele-ASD-Peds for diagnosis for use in telehealth. All of these tests should be used as part of a larger assessment, and not just on their own, as the determination of Autism is best completed with multiple sources of information.

Where to go for an Evaluation

Families seeking an autism diagnosis in Massachusetts have access to several reputable hospitals offering comprehensive evaluation and support services. There can be extensive waitlists. We recommend asking to be put on the cancellation list. These centers offer specialized services to support families seeking autism diagnoses and related care. Here are some prominent centers in Massachusetts.

Autism Spectrum Center at Boston Children's Hospital

Boston, MA

Provides comprehensive, family-centered diagnostic and care services for children with autism spectrum disorder, including evaluations, specialty care, and support services.

<https://www.childrenshospital.org/programs/autism-spectrum-center>

Lurie Center for Autism at Massachusetts General Hospital

Lexington, MA

A multidisciplinary program dedicated to treating individuals with Autism and other developmental disorders across the lifespan.

<https://www.massgeneral.org/children/autism/lurie-center>

DIAGNOSIS



The Autism Program at Boston Medical Center

Boston, MA

Assists and empowers Autistic individuals and their families through direct patient support, provider education, and community-based outreach.

<https://www.bmc.org/pediatrics-autism-program>

Bressler Program for Autism Spectrum Disorder at Massachusetts General Hospital

Boston, MA

Offers comprehensive psychiatric assessments for intellectually intact individuals with autism spectrum disorder and associated psychiatric conditions.

<https://www.massgeneral.org/psychiatry/treatments-and-services/clinical-and-research-program-for-autism-spectrum-disorder>

Autism Spectrum Disorders Program at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

Boston, MA

Provides evaluations and interventions, including behavioral and communication therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy for individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

<https://www.bidmc.org/conditions-and-treatments/mental-and-behavioral-health/autism-spectrum-disorder>

Center for Children with Special Needs at Tufts Medical Center

Boston, MA

Offers evaluation, diagnosis, advocacy, and support for children with special needs, including autism spectrum disorders.

<https://www.tuftsmedicine.org/services-treatments/pediatrics/center-children-special-needs>

UMass Chan Medical School - The Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders (CANDO)

Worcester, MA

Provides comprehensive diagnostic evaluations and specialized care for individuals with autism.

<https://www.umassmed.edu/psychiatry/clinicalservices/child-adolescent-clinical-services/cando/>

Newly Identified with Autism

A Caregiver's Resource
for Connecting to the
Support you Need



If your child or loved one has been recently identified with Autism, you likely have a lot of questions. You might feel overwhelmed, uncertain, and unsure of what to do next. These feelings are common, and the Autism Society is here to support you.

Being identified with Autism doesn't change who your child or loved one is, they're still the same person you've known and loved every step of the way. You can use this new information to better understand your child's experiences. And while it may feel overwhelming, being identified opens doors to valuable resources and support for your family. As their strongest advocate, this understanding will help you meet their needs and ensure they have the support they need to thrive.

You aren't alone on this journey. Connecting with other families, community groups, and resources can provide invaluable support. Here are a few ideas on what to do next:

Learn About Autism

The more you understand about Autism, the better you'll be able to support your child and make informed decisions about services that are best aligned with their individual strengths and needs.

- Check out our online Foundations of Autism Course Package through our Training and Resource Center. <https://autismsociety.org/training-resource-center/>
- Seek to learn from the lived experiences of the Autism community. There are many Autism advocates who have written books and blogs, and many have active social media accounts sharing their experiences.

Education

Beginning with early intervention services (more information in this guide), your local school district offers services to children with disabilities age 3 to 22 (see our school age guide for more information). Even if your child has a medical diagnosis of Autism, the school will do an educational evaluation to identify educational needs. Connect with your local school district to learn more about what special education services are available to you.



Interventions & Therapies

While there is no known cure for Autism, there are treatment and education approaches that can address some of the challenges associated with the condition. Intervention can help to lessen disruptive behaviors, and education can teach self-help skills for greater independence. But just as there is no one symptom or behavior that identifies people with Autism, there is no single treatment that will be effective for everyone who experiences Autism.

Individuals can use the positive aspects of their condition to their benefit, but treatment must begin as early as possible and focus on the individual's unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs. There are a range of interventions and therapies that may be helpful to your child as they grow and develop. Families should learn about the options, ask questions, and choose what they feel is in the best interest of their child and family. Each person with Autism is unique and it will be important to choose services and supports that best supports your child's specific needs. No single service or intervention is likely to meet the needs of every individual with Autism. Services and support should be offered by trained, qualified professionals. The interventions and therapies should encourage self-determination, foster community involvement, and improve quality of life.

Throughout the history of the Autism Society, parents and professionals have been confounded by conflicting messages regarding which treatment options are appropriate for children and adults who experience Autism. As each person responds to treatment differently, we cannot endorse any one treatment or program. Families should educate themselves about all options and choose what they feel is in the best interest of their child and family, based on their experience and what resources are available.

Review different types of interventions and therapies on the Autism Society page here:

<https://autismsociety.org/resources/intervention-and-therapies/>

www.autismsocietyma.org



Some options include:

- Early Start Denver Model
- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)
- Assistive Technology Augmentative & Alternative Communication
- Occupational Therapy
- Physical Therapy
- Speech Therapy

Evaluating Interventions & Therapies

It is important to match a child's potential and specific needs with treatments or strategies that are likely to help them reach established goals and greatest potential. The Autism Society does not want to give the impression that parents, caregivers, or professionals will select just one treatment from a list. A search for appropriate treatment must be paired with the knowledge that all treatment approaches are not equal – what works for one will not work for all. Individuals can use the positive aspects of their condition to their benefit, but treatment must begin as early as possible and focus on the individual's unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Review the report from the National Autism Center that reviews evidence-based practices. <https://nationalautismcenter.org/national-standards/>

Making Informed Decisions

To the maximum extent possible, informed decisions should be made by the individual with Autism and their family members in partnership with a multidisciplinary team. The selection of current evidence-based intervention practices should be guided by objective assessment, goals, and outcomes. Services and support should be delivered with fidelity by qualified and appropriately trained professionals. All services should promote self-determination, enhance inclusive community engagement, and result in improved quality of life. Abuse of any kind is not acceptable. No single service or intervention is likely to meet the needs of every individual with Autism. Each person should have broad and equal access to high quality, individualized support and services. Selection of a program, service, or intervention method should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the person's abilities, needs, and interests. Services should be outcome-based to ensure they meet the individualized goals of the person with Autism.



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After identifying available treatments, interventions, therapies and other services, you'll need to choose which ones are best for you or your child. Here are some considerations to help you make your decision:

- What is the purpose of this theory/practice?
- What do I have to do to benefit from the theory/practice, and what are its lasting effects?
- For how long must my child be involved in this theory/practice to benefit from it?
- Is there any physical or psychological harm this theory/practice could do to my child?
- What are the personal costs of time and money that I will have to endure, and can I be reimbursed for these expenses?
- How will the effects of this theory/practice be evaluated?
- Are the theoreticians or practitioners competently and appropriately trained and prepared to implement the provisions of the theory or practice? How is their competence assured?
- What steps will be taken to protect my privacy?
- Are there any legal actions, current or past, against promoters, consumers or practitioners of the theory/practice?
- How successful has the program been for other children?
- Do staff members have training and experience in working with children with Autism?
- How are activities planned and organized?
- Are there predictable daily schedules and routines?
- How much individual attention will my child receive?
- How is progress measured? Will my child's behavior be closely observed and recorded?
- Will my child be given tasks and rewards that are personally motivating?
- Is the environment designed to minimize distractions?
- Will the program prepare me to continue the therapy at home?
- What is the cost, time commitment, and location of the program?

Health and Wellenss

Getting the right health care for your child from the start is essential to their growth and development. If your child has been diagnosed with autism or is showing early signs, building a strong relationship with a knowledgeable pediatrician is one of the most important steps you can take. Your child's doctor will help monitor their development, provide guidance on next steps, and refer you to specialists who can support their needs.

Regular well-child visits with a trusted primary care provider allow you to track milestones, discuss concerns, and ensure your child receives routine medical care, including vaccinations. Vaccines are a critical part of keeping your child healthy, protecting them from serious illnesses like measles, whooping cough, and polio. Scientific research has repeatedly confirmed that vaccines do not cause autism. The Autism Society actively works to combat misinformation so families can make informed health decisions based on evidence. Learn more the Autism Society Vaccine Initiative. <https://autismsociety.org/vei/>

If your child has been diagnosed with Autism or is undergoing evaluation, your pediatrician can connect you with specialists to support their development. Depending on your child's needs, they may refer you to:

- Developmental Pediatricians – Specialists in diagnosing and supporting Autism and other developmental differences.
- Neurologists – Doctors who assess brain function and address concerns like seizures or sleep issues.
- Gastroenterologists – Experts in digestive issues, which are common for people with Autism.
- Speech and Language Therapists – Professionals who help with communication skills and feeding challenges.
- Occupational Therapists – Specialists who work on sensory processing and daily life skills.
- Early Intervention (EI) Services – A state-funded program that provides therapies and support for children under age 3 to help with development and learning.

Early diagnosis and intervention can make a big difference in your child's long-term success. Massachusetts has strong health care resources, but navigating them can be challenging. Having a primary care provider who understands Autism and can guide you through referrals, insurance coverage, and available therapies is essential.

Early Intervention (EI) Services In Massachusetts

What is Early Intervention (EI)?

Early Intervention (EI) in Massachusetts is a statewide program designed to support infants and toddlers from birth to age three who have developmental delays or are at risk for delays. The goal of EI is to enhance a child's growth and learning through individualized, developmentally appropriate activities that fit into a family's daily routine. These services are family-centered and aim to empower parents and caregivers by providing strategies that help children build essential skills.

Who is Eligible for Early Intervention?

A child under three years old may be eligible for EI services if they:

- Are not reaching age-appropriate milestones.
- Have been diagnosed with certain medical conditions.
- Have a medical or social history that may increase their risk for developmental delays.

Families do not need a formal diagnosis to begin the EI process. If you have concerns about your child's development, reaching out to an EI provider can help determine eligibility and next steps.

How to Access Early Intervention in Massachusetts

Families can self-refer or be referred by a healthcare provider, daycare provider, or other professional.

Find a local Early Intervention program:

- Visit the Massachusetts Early Intervention website and search for an EI provider in your area by city/town. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/ei-program-contact-information>
- Contact the program directly to request an evaluation. The initial evaluation is free and will assess your child's development across multiple areas, including communication, motor skills, cognitive skills, and social-emotional development.

Early Intervention (EI) Services In Massachusetts

What to Expect from Early Intervention Services

If your child qualifies for EI, services will be customized based on your child's needs and family priorities. The goal of EI is to integrate learning opportunities into a child's everyday experiences, making development a natural and supported process.

Key Components of EI Services:

- Visits from trained EI specialists – Professionals such as developmental specialists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists will visit your home or child's daycare to provide targeted support and hands-on strategies. They will work with your family to help integrate new skills into daily routines such as mealtime, playtime, and bedtime.
- Coaching and support for parents – Parents and caregivers play the most significant role in a child's development. EI specialists will guide families on how to encourage language, motor, and cognitive skills through daily interactions. They provide ongoing feedback, education, and emotional support.
- Collaboration with other professionals – EI teams work closely with pediatricians, daycare providers, and other professionals involved in your child's care to ensure a coordinated approach. If necessary, they will also help connect families with additional resources and specialists.
- Services in natural environments – EI services are most effective when delivered in places where children feel comfortable, such as their home, daycare, or community settings. By practicing new skills in familiar environments, children are more likely to retain and generalize their learning.

Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)

Once a child qualifies for EI, an IFSP is developed. It is a personalized plan that outlines:

- The child's strengths and areas of need.
- Family priorities and goals for their child's development.
- Specific services and frequency of visits from EI providers.
- Strategies and activities to support the child's learning and development within daily routines.
- Plans for transitioning out of EI services when the child approaches age three.

The IFSP is reviewed every six months to ensure progress is being made and adjustments are made as needed. Parents are active participants in the IFSP process and work closely with EI providers to set meaningful and achievable goals for their child.

Early Intervention (EI) Services In Massachusetts

Early Intervention and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

For children diagnosed with Autism, Massachusetts offers Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) services through Specialty Service Provider (SSP) agencies. These services are designed to support young children with ASD by providing intensive, evidence-based interventions tailored to their unique needs.

Key Components of EIBI Services:

- Building skills in language, social interaction, and play – Children receive structured and naturalistic interventions to improve their ability to communicate, engage with others, and participate in daily activities.
- Comprehensive assessments – Specialists conduct evaluations to develop individualized treatment plans that target key areas of development.
- Home-based direct services – EIBI is typically delivered in the child's natural environment, allowing for real-world practice and reinforcement of new skills.
- Parent training and support – Caregivers are provided with strategies and tools to continue their child's learning outside of therapy sessions, fostering continued progress at home and in the community.
- Collaboration with Early Intervention professionals – EIBI specialists work alongside general EI providers to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to intervention.

Referral Process for EIBI Services:

If a child receives an autism diagnosis before the age of three, they are eligible for Specialty Service Provider (SSP) EI services.

The process includes:

1. The EI service coordinator discussing EIBI options with the family.
2. The family receiving a list of specialty providers within their geographical area to choose from.
Once a provider is chosen, referral from the EI provider will be sent
3. The selected provider conducting an initial assessment and developing a personalized intervention plan.

Visit the Massachusetts EI Specialty Services page to download the current list of EIBI providers:

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/early-intervention-ei-autism-spectrum-disorder-specialty-services>

Early Intervention (EI) Services In Massachusetts

Cost of Early Intervention Early Intervention

Services in Massachusetts are provided at no out-of-pocket cost to families, regardless of income or insurance coverage.

Aging Out of Early Intervention Services

Early Intervention services end when a child turns three. However, children who continue to need support may transition to Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services provided by their local school district.

Transition Planning:

- At 2 years 3 months, families should begin discussing transition plans with their EI team to explore future support options.
- By 2 years 9 months, the EI program refers eligible children to the local school district for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services.
- Once the referral is made, the school district must complete an evaluation and schedule a meeting with the family and EI team to review results and determine next steps.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) Services:

ECSE provides specialized instruction and related services to children ages 3-5 who qualify for special education. If a child is eligible, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is created to address their specific needs and ensure continued support in the least restrictive environment (LRE). ECSE services can take place in public preschool programs, private childcare settings, or home-based environments, depending on the child's needs.

All services under ECSE are provided at no cost to families and ensure that children receive appropriate interventions to support their learning, social-emotional growth, and independence. Families are encouraged to stay actively involved in the transition process by attending meetings, asking questions, and working closely with their child's new team to create a seamless transition.

For more information about special education services, download our School Age Guide.

Insurance Coverage

In recent years, Massachusetts has made significant strides in expanding insurance coverage for individuals with Autism to access services. Services covered by medical insurance are classified as medically necessary, which qualifies them as “treatments”. Let’s review key legislation and various types of health insurance coverage available for Autism treatment in Massachusetts.

Key Legislation

1. **ARICA (An Act Relative to Insurance Coverage for Autism)**: Passed in 2010, ARICA mandates that private health insurers in Massachusetts provide coverage for the diagnosis and treatment of Autism. This law has been crucial in ensuring that individuals with Autism can access necessary treatment without facing financial barriers.
2. **Autism Omnibus Bill**: Enacted in 2014, this legislation expanded coverage for Autism treatment under MassHealth, the state’s Medicaid program. The bill aims to enhance access to a broader range of services for individuals with Autism.

Types of Health Insurance and Coverage for Autism Treatment

Understanding your health insurance plan is essential to determine what Autism treatment coverage is available. Here’s an overview of various types of health insurance plans and their coverage for autism treatments:

Understanding Your Insurance Coverage

When navigating coverage, it’s important to understand the different types of insurance you may have:

- **Public Insurance**: This includes MassHealth (Massachusetts Medicaid) and Medicare. Eligibility for MassHealth varies based on factors such as income, age, and disability status. Notably, individuals with disabilities often qualify for MassHealth regardless of their income, although premiums may apply if the household income exceeds certain levels.

Insurance Coverage

- **Private Insurance:** Most employers offer health insurance to employees, typically in two main forms:
 - **Fully Funded Plans:** In this setup, employers purchase insurance from a company, which is then responsible for covering health care costs. Fully funded plans in Massachusetts must comply with ARICA, providing coverage for autism treatments.
 - **Self-Funded Plans:** The employer pays directly for employees' health care costs. While these plans are subject to federal regulations rather than state laws like ARICA, many still provide some level of autism treatment coverage.
 - It's crucial to note that both fully funded and self-funded plans can appear similar on the surface, which may make it challenging to determine the type of plan you have.
- **Other Private Plans:** State employees and some municipal employees typically receive their insurance through the Group Insurance Commission (GIC), all of which are subject to ARICA. The Massachusetts Health Connector also offers various plans, but only certain Unsubsidized Qualified Health Plans (QHPs) are required to comply with ARICA.

Type of Plan	Coverage	Notes
MassHealth	YES	ABA therapy is covered under MassHealth Standard, CommonHealth, and Family Assistance. Age limits may apply.
Private Fully Funded Plans	YES	Coverage is provided, but out-of-state plans may vary.
Private Self-Funded Plans	Maybe	Coverage can differ; it's advisable to contact your HR department or insurance plan for specifics.
State Employees (GIC)	YES	All plans under the Group Insurance Commission comply with ARICA.
Connector QHP	YES	Coverage depends on the specific plan; check the details of your insurance.

Insurance Coverage

What Services Are Covered

Under Massachusetts law, a range of services is covered for individuals diagnosed with Autism when prescribed or ordered by a licensed physician or psychologist who determines that the care is medically necessary.

Here's an overview of the services that are typically covered:

- **Habilitative or Rehabilitative Care:** This includes professional counseling and guidance services, as well as treatment programs essential for developing, maintaining, and restoring an individual's functioning to the fullest extent possible. One prominent type of care in this category is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), which must be supervised by a board-certified behavior analyst.
- **Pharmacy Care:** Coverage extends to medications prescribed by licensed physicians, along with any health-related services deemed medically necessary to assess the need for or effectiveness of those medications. This is consistent with how pharmacy care is provided for other medical conditions under the insurance policy.
- **Psychiatric Care:** Direct or consultative services provided by a licensed psychiatrist are included in the coverage. This ensures that individuals have access to necessary mental health support from qualified professionals.
- **Psychological Care:** Services offered by licensed psychologists, whether direct or consultative, are also covered. This is vital for addressing the psychological aspects associated with Autism.
- **Therapeutic Care:** This encompasses a variety of services provided by licensed or certified professionals, including speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and social workers. These therapeutic interventions are essential for helping individuals develop skills and strategies to navigate daily challenges effectively.

It's important to note that insurance coverage for Autism treatments does not affect the educational services provided under an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), Individualized Education Program (IEP), or Individualized Service Plan (ISP). These educational services are governed by different laws and regulations, ensuring that people with Autism receive the support they need in their educational settings, regardless of their insurance coverage. This means that someone can access both insurance-covered treatments and the educational services outlined in their IFSP, IEP, or ISP without any conflict between the two.

Insurance Coverage

How to Access Services

To access autism treatment services, the first step is to contact your insurance company. It's crucial to understand exactly what your plan covers, as well as any limits or specific requirements. Your insurance provider can also offer a list of approved providers or give you access to an online portal where you can search for providers covered by your plan.

In addition to checking with your insurance, there are other ways to find qualified providers:

- **Ask Your Primary Care Provider:** Your child's doctor is a great resource for provider recommendations. They often have a network of specialists they work with regularly and can point you in the right direction.
- **Contact Providers Directly:** If you already have a provider in mind, reach out to their office to confirm that they accept your insurance. You can also call different providers to ask if they accept your plan and learn more about their services.

Once you find a provider that works for you, contact them to begin the intake process. If there's a wait for services, don't be discouraged. Consider getting on the waitlists of several providers and choose the first one that has an opening. This way, you can start receiving services sooner, and if needed, you can switch providers later as more availability opens up.

Insurance Resource

The Insurance Resource Center is a valuable resource for families navigating Autism-related insurance challenges. They are experts in this field and can assist with understanding coverage, answering questions, and overcoming insurance barriers. For more information, visit their website: massairc.org

Accessing Health Insurance in Massachusetts

MassHealth provides health coverage for eligible children, families, and individuals, including those with disabilities. It ensures that families have access to essential medical services, including Early Intervention. To learn more about MassHealth and apply for coverage, visit <https://www.mass.gov/information-for-masshealth-applicants>

Department of Developmental Services

Department of Developmental Services (DDS)

The Department of Developmental Disabilities (DDS) is the primary service agency in Massachusetts for adults with developmental disabilities, but they also offer limited support for children. The program offers a range of services to help children and families, including:

- Information and Referral Services
- Family support services, such as respite care and emergency stipends.
- Specialized programs for children, including behavioral and therapeutic interventions.
- Support through the transition planning for children aging out of Early Intervention to help them access appropriate educational and community-based services.
- Autism Waiver Program provides intensive in-home and community-based services for children with autism up to age nine, on MassHealth Standard and who meet specific eligibility criteria. This program is designed to help children develop essential life skills and improve their ability to participate in daily activities. Enrollment is limited, and families must apply through an annual open lottery process. Learn more here:

<https://www.mass.gov/dds-childrens-autism-waiver-service-program-overview>

Families can apply for DDS services by completing the application, providing required documentation and sending it to their local eligibility center. Visit this website to start the process: <https://www.mass.gov/dds-eligibility-services>

DDS Autism Support Centers

Massachusetts has seven Autism Support Centers that provide a range of services for families of children with autism. These centers offer culturally responsive support, ensuring that families from diverse backgrounds can access information and resources tailored to their needs. Services provided include:

- Information and referral services to help families navigate available supports.
- Family clinics and support groups to connect caregivers with professionals and peers.
- Training sessions and workshops on autism-related topics.
- Parent mentoring and networking opportunities to foster a strong support system.
- Social and recreational events.

These centers collaborate with community organizations to provide comprehensive and culturally competent services. To find your local Autism Support Center, visit:

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/dds-autism-support-centers>
www.autismsocietyma.org

Other State and Federal Services

Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA)

The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) provides support and resources to low-income individuals and families in Massachusetts, helping them meet basic needs, enhance their quality of life, and work toward long-term financial stability. DTA serves approximately one in six residents of the Commonwealth by offering direct economic assistance through cash benefits, food assistance via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and workforce training opportunities. The agency also connects individuals with housing resources, child care assistance, and other essential services to promote self-sufficiency and economic mobility. For more information, visit <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/departments-of-transitional-assistance>

Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides financial assistance to children with disabilities, including autism, to help cover basic needs such as food, shelter, and medical care. To qualify, a child must be under 18 (or under 22 if a full-time student) and have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment that results in significant functional limitations and is expected to last at least 12 months.

Parents' income and resources may affect eligibility through a process called "deeming," where a portion of their financial resources is considered available to the child. Most children who receive SSI also qualify for Medicaid, which helps cover medical expenses, and additional state services may be available. Families in the military can apply for SSI benefits while stationed overseas, though Medicaid is not available in those situations. To learn more or apply for SSI benefits for a child with autism, visit <https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/text-child-ussi.htm>

Future and Financial Planning

Many individuals who experience Autism require ongoing support throughout their lifespan. One of the primary worries of family members is, “What will happen to my loved one with Autism when I am no longer able to provide care for them due to my own aging, illness or death?”

With careful planning this concern can be lessened. There are significant details to navigate, including financial and legal concerns for children and adults with Autism who require ongoing support that extends beyond what a family can provide. This could be because the family member with Autism outlives their familial support network, the needs extend beyond what a family can provide due to their own healthcare needs, or a host of other circumstances.

Individuals and families should be empowered to make a plan for their future. One planning tool that may help is the [Charting the Lifecourse framework](#). This framework is designed for individuals and family members to design and plan their life and advocate for support.

Special Needs Trust (SNT)

In order to qualify for certain government benefits, an individual with disabilities must meet stringent standards for financial need. If your child will be dependent upon such public programs for medical care, housing, employment assistance or other services, you may wish to supplement the very basic levels of support provided. Assets that are held by SNTs are not considered by the government when evaluating applications for means-tested programs.

In addition, an SNT is a good tool for ensuring that the assets set aside for an individual with disabilities are managed responsibly and not subject to creditors. There are several types of SNTs, depending upon who funds them and how they are administered. Find out more about Special Needs Trust in this fact sheet within The Arc’s Center for Future Planning: <https://futureplanning.thearc.org/pages/learn/where-to-start/financing-the-future/special-needs-trusts>

Future and Financial Planning

Will

A will details your wishes concerning the disposition of your property upon death. It establishes what portion of your estate should be allocated to your child with disabilities and other heirs, and whether or not certain funds should be held by a special needs trust. While there's no such thing as a perfect plan, doing nothing is almost certainly a bad plan. The point is to create a flexible plan that can—and will—change over time to reflect events in the lives of all involved. The Special Needs Alliance provides a list of special needs attorneys near you. <https://www.specialneedsalliance.org/find-an-attorney/>

Letter of Intent

The letter of intent (LOI), while not a legal document, is key to your special needs planning. There's a tremendous amount of information about a child's history that only a parent knows, and particularly for adults with Autism who have more difficulty expressing themselves, an LOI can provide information that might otherwise be difficult to access.

It's a great resource for trustees and service providers, summarizing information regarding family history, an individual's needs, habits and preferences, and your hopes for the future. The Special Needs Alliance provides more information, including sample letters.

<https://www.specialneedsalliance.org/the-voice/letter-of-intent-4/>

Grief and Bereavement

Unfortunately, loss and grief are part of life. All people, including children and adults who experience Autism, grieve in their own unique ways. Grief can be complex for any of us. It is important to acknowledge that any loss can cause grief. Loss of a favorite toy or routine as well as the loss of a house, school, or family member can be very significant. All people need support and understanding when they are experiencing the challenges of loss and grief, including those who experience Autism.

Thanks to the Indiana Center on Autism for providing the guidance on Supporting Individuals with Autism Coping with Grief or Loss through Death or Divorce.

<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/articles/supporting-individuals-on-the-autism-spectrum-coping-with-grief-and-loss>

The Georgetown University Center on Disabilities offers this resource: Complex and Moral Issues: End of Life Decisions. <https://gucchd.georgetown.edu/complex/index.html>

See also the Center for Loss & Life Transition for a wide number of useful resources in grief and loss. <https://www.centerforloss.com/>

Safety

Disability Indicator Form

The Disability Indicator Form allows individuals with disabilities or their caregivers to notify 9-1-1 personnel that someone in the home may require specialized assistance during an emergency. This information helps first responders provide appropriate support by understanding specific needs before arriving on the scene. The indicator is linked to a phone number, ensuring that when a 9-1-1 call is placed, dispatchers are immediately alerted to the presence of an individual with a disability. This service is available for landline, wireless, and VoIP consumers in Massachusetts. <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/request-a-disability-indicator-form-for-landline-wireless-and-voip-consumers>

Project Lifesaver

Project Lifesaver is a program designed to help quickly locate individuals with autism, dementia, or other cognitive conditions who may wander and become lost. Participants wear a small, trackable transmitter that enables trained search teams to find them more efficiently, reducing search times and increasing safety. The program is used by law enforcement and emergency responders across the country to provide peace of mind to families and caregivers. <https://projectlifesaver.org/get-involved/enroll-a-loved-one/>

Medical ID Bracelets

Did you know that one third of children who elope cannot identify themselves? Safety is of utmost importance for children with autism, especially when it comes to elopement or wandering behaviors. One simple yet effective tool that can provide peace of mind for parents and caregivers is a medical ID bracelet. Learn more about our medical ID program: <https://www.autismsocietyma.org/medical-id> and our tips for picking the right one: <https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/medical-id-bracelets>

Water Safety

Water safety is especially important for children with autism, as they are at a higher risk of wandering and may be drawn to water without recognizing potential dangers. Teaching water safety skills, providing close supervision, and using protective measures like fences and alarms can help prevent accidents. The Autism Society offers various resources to support families in promoting water safety for individuals with autism. Learn more at

<https://autismsociety.org/water-and-wandering/>

Adaptive Swim Programs in MA

These resources are provided for your reference, but we do not endorse specific programs or services. We encourage you to research and determine what best fits your needs.

- **YMCA Adaptive Swim Programs:** These programs are designed to accommodate various needs through individualized instruction, small group classes, and trained instructors who adapt lessons to each participant's abilities. Locations include:
 - Greater Boston: <https://ymcaboston.org/healthy-living/healthy-living-swimming/swimming-lessons/>
 - Metro North: <https://www.ymcametronorth.org/aquatics/adaptive-swim-lessons/>
 - Charles River: <https://ymcaboston.org/charlesriver/>
 - South Shore: <https://ssymca.org/program/health-fitness/adaptive-programs/>
 - Greater Lowell: <https://greaterlowellymca.org/index.php/programs/aquatics/swim-lessons/>
- **Easter Seals:** Offers year-round adaptive swim program at the YWCA of Central Massachusetts. <https://www.easterseals.com/ma/programs-and-services/recreation/adaptive-swim.html>
- **Adaptive Sports New England:** Swim lessons held in partnership with the Hale Family YMCA and Simmons University. Located in Boston and Quincy. <https://adaptivesportsne.org/swim-lessons/>
- **Angel Fish:** Provides lessons in Middlesex County and Norfolk County. <https://swimangelfish.com/adaptive-swim-lessons>
- **Berkshire South Community Center:** <https://berkshiresouth.org/aquatics-adaptive/>
- **Springfield Jewish Community Center:** <https://www.springfieldjcc.org/forms/adaptive-aquatics-waitlist-form/>



Autism Society Massachusetts

The Autism Awareness Card is a simple and effective way to share information about Autism with those around you. These printable cards are designed to help you quickly and easily explain Autism in various situations, whether at the grocery store, in a restaurant, or during community outings. You can print them at home or at a local print shop, and keep a few on hand to share whenever you feel the need to educate or raise awareness

I have Autism.

Autism is medical condition. It impairs my ability to communicate. As a result, I may have difficulty understanding your directions. I may be nonspeaking. I may get physically agitated if you touch me or get too close. Please speak calming to me and give me a minute to process.

 Autism Society www.autismsocietyma.org

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About Us

The Autism Society of Massachusetts is dedicated to empowering individuals with autism and their families by providing education, advocacy, and community support. Our mission is to create a more inclusive world where individuals with autism have access to the resources, opportunities, and understanding they need to thrive. With a commitment to lifelong support, we work to foster acceptance, improve awareness, and connect families and professionals with essential tools and information. Through collaboration and education, we strive to make Massachusetts a place where every individual with autism is valued, supported, and included.

Services



Information and Referral



Education and Training



Resource Guides



Awareness and Advocacy



Public Policy



Safety Resources



First Responder Programs