



**Autism
Society**
Massachusetts



GUIDE TO AUTISM SERVICES IN MASSACHUSETTS

School Age



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

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://bidmc.org/services/behavioral-health/neuropsychological-testing>

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/>

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.



Special Education Services

Every child in the United States has a right to a public education, this includes children with Autism and other disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), is the federal law that guarantees a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for every student with a disability. The law's 2004 reauthorization (P.L. 108-446) further defined children's rights to educational services and strengthened the role of parents/care providers in their children's educational planning process. This means that the education for students enrolled in public school should come at no cost and should be appropriate for their age, ability, and developmental level. The law specifies that educational placement should be on an individual basis, not solely on the diagnosis or category of disability.

Parents/care providers have a voice in the educational process. But keep in mind that IDEA requires that an appropriate educational program be provided, but not necessarily the one that is "ideal" for every child. It is important that parents/care providers work with the school to get the educational support and services the student needs.

Educational planning for students with Autism often addresses a wide range of skill development, including academics, communication and language, social skills, self-help skills, behavioral issues, self-advocacy, and leisure-related skills. It's important to consult with professionals trained specifically in Autism to help a child benefit from their school program. Obtaining a range of opinions is also useful.

- **504 Plan** is used by a general education student who is not eligible for special education services. A 504 Plan lists accommodations related to the child's disability and required by the child so that he or she may participate in the general classroom setting and educational programs.
- **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** is a legally binding document developed for students with disabilities. It outlines the specific educational goals, services, and accommodations tailored to meet the individual needs of the student. The IEP is created through collaboration between educators, parents or guardians, and sometimes the student themselves, and is reviewed and revised annually. Its purpose is to ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate educational support to help them succeed academically and reach their full potential.
- **Eligibility for an IEP:** The child is eligible for an IEP if they have one of the following disabilities:
 - Autism
 - Developmental Delay
 - Intellectual
 - Sensory: hearing, vision, deaf or blind
 - Neurological
 - Emotional
 - Communication
 - Physical
 - Specific Learning
 - Health - example-ADHD.

And

- They are not making "effective progress" in school, and
- They are not making effective progress because of their disability, and,
- To make effective progress, they need specially designed instruction, related services, or both.

Special Education Services

Plan	504 Plan	IEP
Eligibility	A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity like learning, walking, writing or seeing.	<u>Qualifying disabilities.</u>
Goal	To make sure that the child's disability does not stop them from learning, completing their school work, and it is not a barrier to getting around the school building, and participating in school activities as their peers do.	To provide specialized instruction or related services to eligible students so they can make progress in the general education curriculum.
What your child gets	Services and accommodations to make sure they get the same education their peers get.	Specialized instruction , related services, and accommodations that are unique to your child's needs.

[from Mass Legal Help](#)

Request Special Education Services Evaluation: If you are concerned about your child's academic, social, emotional, or physical development, you have the right to request a special education evaluation through your child's school. This evaluation helps determine whether your child qualifies for support services such as a 504 Plan or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to address their unique learning needs. Learn more about the process here: <https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/how-to-request-a-special-education-services>

To begin the process, follow these steps:

- Request an evaluation from the school to assess your child's needs.
- Provide a "request for an evaluation" letter to the Special Education coordinator or principal. The letter should include: I am writing to express concern about (child's name)'s development and would like to initiate a Special Education evaluation for (child's name).
- Timeline: Consent should be provided within 5 school days, evaluations should be completed within 30 school days and team meeting should take place within 45 school days.
- If your child is deemed eligible, you will collaborate with the school to develop a 504 Plan or an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Learn more about the difference between a 504 Plan and an IEP here: <https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/understanding-the-difference-between-an-iep-and-a-504>

Special Education Services

Parent's Role

Navigating special education services is a very pro-active activity for most families. There are important short- and long-term tasks at any given moment, and the specific road you take will depend largely on your child's needs and progress, the school district's assessments of your child's needs, and your willingness and ability to intervene when those are out of alignment.

As a parent, you are a critical member of your child's IEP Team. You are responsible for being the primary advocate for your child, and the State affords you with certain rights and procedural safeguards to ensure the process is conducted fairly. The Massachusetts Department of Early and Secondary Education (DESE) publishes the Parent's Notice of Procedural Safeguards booklet that is available at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/prb/>. It is highly recommended that you take the time to read this booklet or take a training on your rights in the IEP process <https://fcsn.org/news/#calendar> or Wrightslaw: <https://www.wrightslaw.com/>

Understanding the IEP

The IEP is a written document that outlines a child's education. As the name implies, the education program should be tailored to the individual student to provide the maximum benefit. The keyword is individual. A program that is appropriate for one child with Autism may not be right for another.

The IEP is the cornerstone for the education of a child with a disability. It should identify the services a child needs so that he/she will meet their learning objectives during the school year. It is also a legal document that outlines:

- The child's special education plan (goals for the school year)
- Services needed to help the child meet those goals
- A method for evaluating the student's progress

The objectives, goals, and selected services are not just a collection of ideas on how the school may educate a child; the school district must educate your child in accordance with the IEP.

To develop an IEP, your city/town staff and others involved in the child's educational program meet to discuss education-related goals. By law, the following people must be invited to attend the IEP meeting:

- One or both of the child's parents/care providers
- The child's teacher or prospective teacher
- A representative of the city/town school district, other than the child's teacher, who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of special education
- The child, if appropriate
- Other individuals at the discretion of the parent(s)/care provider(s) or agency (e.g. a physician, advocate, or neighbor)

Special Education Services

IEP meetings must be held at least once annually but may be held more often if needed. Parents/care providers may request a review or revision of the IEP at any time. While teachers and school personnel may come prepared for the meeting with an outline of goals and objectives, the IEP is not complete until it has been thoroughly discussed, and all parties agree to the terms of the written document.

Parents/care providers are entitled to participate in the IEP meeting as equal participants with suggestions and opinions regarding their child's education. They may bring a list of suggested goals and objectives as well as additional information that may be pertinent to the IEP meeting.

The local education agency (LEA) must attempt to schedule the IEP meeting at a time and place agreeable to both school staff and parents/care providers. School districts must notify parents/care providers in a timely manner so that they will have an opportunity to attend. The notification must indicate the purpose of the meeting (i.e., to discuss transition services, behavior problems interfering with learning, academic growth).

After an evaluation has been done, the IEP meeting will be scheduled. Parents/care providers are entitled by law to attend and participate in this meeting and must be given ample notification of the time and place. Parents/care providers should also request a copy of the evaluation results prior to the meeting so you have time to review them.

When preparing for your IEP meeting, consider the following:

- What is your vision for your child – for the future as well as the next school year?
- What are your child's strengths, needs, and interests?
- What are your major concerns about his/her education?
- What has and has not worked in your child's education thus far?
- Does the evaluation fit with what you know about your child?
- Are there any special factors to consider, such as communication needs or a positive behavioral intervention plan?

While the IEP meeting is meant to develop an education plan for the student, it is also an opportunity for families to share information about their child and their expectations and what techniques have worked at home. If for some reason parents/care providers disagree with the proposed IEP, there is recourse.

Special Education Services

Content of the IEP

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a personalized document designed to support a child's educational needs by outlining specific goals, services, and accommodations. It should address all areas where the child requires assistance, including academic, social, functional, and related services, to ensure meaningful progress. These may include social skills (such as interacting with peers and responding to questions), functional skills (like dressing and crossing the street), and specialized services (such as occupational, speech, or physical therapy). Learn more here:

<https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/what-is-an-iep>

The IEP must include the following key components:

- **Current Performance:** A summary of the child's academic and functional abilities, based on assessments and evaluations. This baseline helps measure progress over time.
- **Annual Goals:** This includes clear, measurable goals that address the child's areas of need. They should be realistic and achievable within 12 months, with a plan for tracking progress. If the child takes an alternative assessment, short-term benchmarks must be included to monitor progress.
- **Special Education Services:** A detailed list of all instructional and related services the child will receive, such as:
 - Speech therapy
 - Occupational therapy
 - Physical therapy
 - Special education programs
 - Transportation assistance, if needed
- **Accommodations and Modifications:** These are adjustments to help the child succeed, such as:
 - Extra time on tests
 - Assistive technology
 - Modified assignments or classroom settings
- **Participation in General Education:** Explanation of how much time the child will spend in a general education classroom versus receiving specialized instruction in a separate setting.
- **Progress Monitoring:** A plan for tracking and reporting progress to parents and the educational team. Clear guidelines on how progress will be measured and how often updates will be provided.
- **Transition Plan (for students 14 and older):** A transition plan helps prepare students for life after high school. Transition services begin at age 14 in Massachusetts and are required by age 16 under federal law. The services include
 - Higher education opportunities
 - Job training or employment
 - Independent living skills

Special Education Services

Service Delivery Grid

The Service Delivery Grid in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a structured plan outlining the types of support your child will receive, who will provide them, and where they will take place. It ensures that all services, from special education instruction to therapy sessions, are clearly defined and scheduled.

The grid is divided into three sections: Grid A (Consultation Services) for behind-the-scenes coordination between educators and specialists, Grid B (In-Class or “Push-In” Services) where support is provided in the general education classroom, and Grid C (Out-of-Class or “Pull-Out” Services) for specialized instruction outside the classroom setting. Each section details the focus of the service, who will provide it, how often it will occur, and where it will take place.

Understanding the Service Delivery Grid helps parents ensure their child is receiving the right level of support. Reviewing the grid during IEP meetings allows you to ask questions and advocate for any necessary adjustments. For a detailed breakdown of how the Service Delivery Grid works, visit:

<https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/understanding-the-service-delivery-grid-in-an-iep>

IEP Placement/Setting

Placement refers to where a child spends their school day. While most students are in general education classrooms, children with autism may require different settings for optimal learning. The setting should occur in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Learn more about LRE here:

<https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/understanding-the-least-restrictive-environment-lre-in-special-education>

Within a school district, placement options include inclusion, partial inclusion, and substantially separate (sub-separate) classrooms, which vary based on the time spent in a general education setting. Some districts may have only one sub-separate classroom per grade level, meaning a child may need to attend a school outside their neighborhood.

If a district cannot provide the necessary services, out-of-district placements may be considered. These options, though less common due to higher costs, may be the most appropriate for some children. Out-of-district placements include:

- Neighboring school districts – Larger districts may offer more specialized programs.
- Collaboratives – Programs funded by multiple districts to share resources. List of MA schools can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/oases/collaborative-list.html>
- Day schools – Private schools specializing in specific disabilities. List of MA schools can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/oases/liaison-list.html>
- Residential placements – Facilities providing 24-hour care for children unable to live safely at home. List of MA schools can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/oases/liaison-list.html>

Placement decisions should prioritize the child’s needs, ensuring they receive the best possible support for their education and development.

Special Education Services- Schools

Public School Special Education: Every city/town in Massachusetts must provide special education services to eligible students, as guaranteed under federal law (IDEA) and Massachusetts state law. That means a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment that meets your child's needs. Special education services tailored to your child's needs, including specialized instruction, related therapies, and placements that range from general education with supports to more specialized programs. Families request an evaluation through their school district, and if a child is eligible, an IEP team, including parents, creates an IEP and determines the appropriate placement; all services are provided at no cost to families.

If a public school is unable to meet a student's needs and the student is not making meaningful progress, the IEP team may explore alternative school programs that can better provide the appropriate supports and services. For some students, accessing alternatives to the public school system can be life-changing, providing the specialized supports and environment they need to thrive. However, the process of securing an out-of-district placement can be lengthy and sometimes complex, involving evaluations, IEP meetings, and coordination with multiple schools or programs. If you feel your child is not making meaningful progress in their current placement, it is important to work with an educational advocate who can help you navigate your options, understand your rights, and ensure your child's needs are being met. Resources and guidance around advocacy have been provided in this guide to support you through this process.

Collaboratives: Massachusetts collaboratives are regional partnerships of school districts that work together to share resources, expertise, and costs. They provide innovative programs, professional training, and specialized services to support districts, educators, families, and students—particularly those with the most complex needs while improving efficiency and expanding educational opportunities across the Commonwealth. Find the program in your area:

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/oases/crs/default.html>

Approved Special Education Schools: If a public school or collaborative is not the right fit for a student, the IEP team may explore an out-of-district placement. In Massachusetts, these schools are approved and monitored by the DESE, and the student's home district is responsible for paying tuition to the placement. You will also hear these schools referred to as 766 Schools.

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/oases/ps-cpr/default.html>

Special Education Services Tips

Tips for Parents Navigating the IEP Process

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) process can feel overwhelming, but as your child's strongest advocate, you play a vital role in ensuring they receive the necessary support. Being organized, informed, and prepared will help you navigate meetings and effectively communicate your child's needs. In Massachusetts, children must be enrolled in school by the age of six, but early intervention and preschool services may be available if your child has developmental needs. Below are some key strategies to help you through the IEP process.

Stay Organized

Keeping all important documents in one place makes it easier to track your child's progress and reference past decisions. A well-organized binder should include copies of the current and past IEPs or 504 Plans, evaluation reports, progress reports, communication logs, and service tracking records. This documentation helps ensure that services are being provided as required.

Document Every Conversation

After speaking with school staff, send a follow-up email summarizing the conversation. Keeping a written record of discussions, decisions, and next steps helps maintain accountability and provides documentation if any concerns arise later. Maintaining a communication log with dates, names, and key points from meetings can also be helpful.

Take Time to Review the IEP

It is not necessary to sign the IEP during the meeting. Take the document home, read through it carefully, and ensure it reflects your child's needs. If you have questions or concerns, request clarification or changes before signing. Parents in Massachusetts have ten days to review and respond to the proposed IEP.

Bring a Support Person

Attending the IEP meeting with a spouse, friend, family member, or advocate can provide emotional support and ensure that important details are documented. Having another person take notes allows you to focus on the discussion and fully engage in the decision-making process.

Prepare a Vision Statement

Before the meeting, write a vision statement outlining your long-term goals and hopes for your child. This helps guide the IEP team in making decisions that align with your child's strengths, challenges, and future aspirations. A vision statement may include academic, social, and independence goals, as well as your expectations for their overall educational experience.

Ensure IEP Goals are SMART

IEP goals should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) to effectively track progress. Instead of a general goal such as "improve reading skills," a SMART goal would state, "By the end of the school year, the student will read a grade-level passage with 90% accuracy in three out of four trials." Clear and measurable goals ensure that progress can be monitored and necessary adjustments can be made. Learn more about SMART goals here: <https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/smart-iep-goals>

Education Advocacy

Advocacy

You are your child's strongest advocate in the IEP process because you know their strengths, challenges, and needs better than anyone else. Navigating special education can be complex, but being informed and proactive ensures your child receives the right support. Here are some tips to help you through the process and signs that you may need additional assistance.

- Circumstances when you may want to hire a special education advocate:
 - Navigating Complex Procedures: If you find the special education process overwhelming or confusing, an advocate can help clarify procedures and guide you through each step.
 - Resolving Disputes: When disagreements arise between you and the school district regarding your child's education plan or services, an advocate can provide support in resolving disputes and advocating for your child's rights.
 - Ensuring Compliance: If you suspect that the school district is not meeting its legal obligations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), an advocate can help ensure that your child receives the appropriate services and accommodations.
 - Developing an Effective IEP: Advocates can assist in crafting an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is tailored to your child's unique needs and goals, ensuring that it is comprehensive and aligned with legal requirements.
 - Empowering Parents: By providing knowledge, support, and resources, advocates empower parents to effectively advocate for their child's educational rights and ensure that they receive a quality education.
- Circumstances when you may want to hire a lawyer:
 - You and the district are in negotiations for a settlement agreement.
 - Your child's school experience is traumatic for them due to bullying and the district is not taking your concerns seriously.
 - You and the district cannot come to an agreement on the IEP, and you need to file for Due Process.
- Here is our guide to navigating disagreement during the IEP process:
<https://www.autismsocietyma.org/blog/navigating-disagreements-with-your-iep-team-options-for-resolving-conflicts-in-special-education>

MA Advocacy Resources

MA Advocates for Children (MAC)

Works to remove barriers to educational and life opportunities for all children through advocacy, training, and policy work.

<https://www.massadvocates.org>

Federation for Children with Special Needs

Supports families by providing information, training, and assistance for children with disabilities and their professional partners.

<https://fcsn.org>



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?

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 most important thing you can do is to apply to DDS for your child. Applications to DDS are age-dependent, so you will need to be careful to select the application that corresponds to your child's current age at the time of application. One application covers applicants from birth through age 4, and a different one covers ages 5 through 22. Both applications can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/lists/dds-eligibility-forms>.

If Child-Eligible, your child will be assigned to a Children's Coordinator at the local Area Office. Depending on need, availability, and eligibility criteria, what happens next will vary. All children are assigned to a Children's Coordinator. They are available for information and referral services. Parents are encouraged to contact the Children's Coord at least annually to check in and update them on any changes to your child's needs.

Specialized DDS Children's Programs (DDS Eligibility Required)

- **Family Support Services** provides resources and assistance which may include respite care, skill-building programs, and assistive technology, are dependent on funding allocated in the Massachusetts state budget each year. Referrals are processed through DDS service coordinators. These services are implemented by Family Support Centers. <https://www.mass.gov/lists/dds-family-support-services-information>
- **Intensive Flexible Family Supports (IFFS)** program assists families caring for a child with a developmental disability who is experiencing significant challenges at home. These challenges may cause severe stress for the family and put the child at risk of requiring an out-of-home placement. IFFS provides case management services and flexible funding to help families access necessary items or services that support their child's needs. The goal of the program is to reduce family stress and help children remain in their homes whenever possible. Referrals are processed through DDS service coordinators.
- **DESE/DDS Program**, established as a residential prevention program for children at high risk of needing residential care or returning home from a residential program. Funding made available for this program can be used to pay service providers and to make related purchases, within the guidelines of the program. The program is for individuals ages 6 to 22. <https://www.mass.gov/dese-dds-program>
- **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>

Department of Developmental Services

DDS Family Support Centers

Family Support Centers in Massachusetts serve as local hubs, providing a wide range of resources and services for families of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Located in each DDS Area, these centers offer culturally responsive support, working with diverse communities to connect families with essential resources. Centers assist families in applying for DDS eligibility, guiding them through the intake process and offering general support services—such as information, referrals, and trainings—even before eligibility is determined. Learn more here:

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/dds-family-support-centers#family-support-centers->

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>

Other State Services

Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI)

Some children with Autism are also diagnosed with mental health disorders like attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), depression, or anxiety disorder. For these children, the support and treatments they receive for Autism do not address the issues related to the mental health disorder. MassHealth has a program called the Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI) that can help with those issues. If eligible, the child can access one or more services through an Intensive Care Coordinator for the program to address and remediate the symptoms of the mental health disorder. Access to the program is made by referral, but a parent may "self-refer" their child for services, too. More information on the CBHI program, including a list of vendors by area, can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/childrens-behavioral-health-initiative-cbhi>.

Personal Care Attendant (PCA) Services

PCA services provide essential in-home support for individuals with disabilities and chronic conditions, helping them with daily activities to maintain independence. In Massachusetts, PCA services are funded through MassHealth and allow eligible individuals to hire and manage their own caregivers, who assist with tasks such as bathing, dressing, meal preparation, mobility, and other personal care needs. These services enable individuals to live in their homes and communities rather than in institutional settings. PCAs can be family members (excluding spouses or legal guardians) or other trusted caregivers chosen by the individual. Eligibility and service hours are determined through an assessment process, and individuals must be able to self-direct their care or have a surrogate to manage services. Learn more here: <https://www.mass.gov/masshealth-personal-care-attendant-program>

Department of Mental Health (DMH)

DMH provides mental health services and supports to eligible children and adolescents to meet their mental health needs. DMH offers care coordination, clinical services, and family support to help children thrive at home, in school, and in the community. Services are individualized and designed to promote emotional wellness, stability, and long-term success. Families can apply for DMH services through a local area office, and eligibility is based on clinical need rather than a specific diagnosis. <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-mental-health>

Financial Supports

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>

Home Modification Loan Program (HMLP)

A state-funded initiative that offers 0% interest loans to make home modifications that improve safety and accessibility for individuals with disabilities, including autism. Homeowners can use the funds for modifications such as installing fencing, creating sensory-friendly spaces, adapting bathrooms or bedrooms, and more. These changes are designed to support individuals with Autism in living safely and independently at home. <https://cedac.org/find-out-if-you-qualify/>

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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 Autism Society www.autismsocietyma.org



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