

Recognizing Autism in Young Children

Quick reference for medical students and physicians · Sokoto, May 2026

EARLY SIGNS BY AGE: ASK ABOUT THESE AT EVERY VISIT

By 12 months	By 18 months	By 24 months	By 36 months
No babbling No pointing or waving No response to name Limited eye contact	No single words No pretend play No interest in other children No gestures	No two-word phrases Loss of words Repetitive behaviors Avoids social interaction	No conversational speech Difficulty with peers Restricted interests Sensory sensitivities

Loss of previously gained skills, at any age, is always a red flag.

HOW TO TALK WITH FAMILIES

SAY THIS

"I have noticed a few things I'd like to share with you."
 "Many children develop differently. Let's look at this together."
 "You know your child best. What have you noticed?"
 "There are people who can help. Let me show you the next step."

DO NOT SAY

"Your child is just slow." (dismisses)
 "It might be from something you did during pregnancy." (blames mother)
 "There is nothing we can do." (false)
 "It is a curse / spiritual problem." (reinforces stigma)

SCREENING TOOLS: FREE

M-CHAT-R/F

Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers

Children 16-30 months · 20 yes/no questions · 5 minutes · 20+ languages

mchatscreen.com

NASQ

Nigeria Autism Screening Questionnaire

Children 1-18 years · Validated on 12,311 Nigerian children · Designed for low-resource settings

pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7613535

WHEN YOU SUSPECT AUTISM: EVEN WITHOUT A SPECIALIST

- 1. Screen** Use the M-CHAT or NASQ. Document results in the file.
- 2. Educate** Explain what autism is, and what it isn't. Reduce stigma.
- 3. Refer** Nearest child psychiatrist, developmental pediatrician, teaching hospital, or NGO.
- 4. Connect** Parent groups, online communities. ABA World offers free consultations.
- 5. Follow up** Don't lose the family in the system. Schedule a return visit.

WHY EARLY IDENTIFICATION MATTERS

The first five years of life are when the brain is most plastic. Early support, even simple coaching of caregivers, dramatically improves communication, behavior, and quality of life. **In Nigeria, the average age at diagnosis is 9 years.** Most autistic children are never diagnosed at all. Your screening at a routine visit can change a child's trajectory.

CONSIDER SPECIALIZING IN AUTISM

Pathways: **Developmental Pediatrics** (after pediatrics) · **Child & Adolescent Psychiatry** (Dr. Bakare's path) · **BCBA Certification** (distance learning available) · **Special Education / Speech Therapy**

ABA World wants to support you. Email info@abaworld.org to learn more about training, mentorship, and free consultations.