

CHILDREN AND AUTISM · 7.2

How Autism Presents in Secondary School Age Children

Autism in secondary school often looks different from autism in primary. The social rules change, the demands stack up, and the work of holding it together gets harder. Here is what to expect at each stage and what parents can do.

FOR

Parents of secondary-age young people

AUDIENCE AGE

12-17

REVIEWED

17 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

How Autism Presents in Secondary School Age Children

What changes at secondary school

- **More teachers, more rooms, less scaffolding.** Primary school provided a familiar teacher, a small room and a stable peer group. Secondary school removes most of that at once. Patterns that were held together at age 10 often come apart in Year 7, or around Year 9 to Year 10 as pressure rises.
- **Social rules become more layered and faster moving.** From around age 12, peer relationships shift in ways that are hard to read if you process them slowly or take language literally. Friendships that worked in primary often dissolve in this window.
- **Executive function load goes up sharply.** Multiple subjects, homework deadlines, equipment, transport, organisation. The demand on planning and self-management is much higher than primary.

What it often looks like

- **Loneliness or being on the edge of friendship groups.** Often more visible than obvious social impairment. Many autistic teenagers prefer one or two close friends to larger groups and find unstructured peer settings (canteen, corridor, free periods) hard.
- **Sensory difficulty with the school environment.** Corridors, halls, dining rooms, PE changing rooms, transport. The cumulative sensory load of a secondary school day is part of why exhaustion builds.
- **Calm at school, dysregulated at home.** Many autistic young people, particularly autistic girls, mask substantially at school and pay for it at home. After-school meltdowns, weekend recovery, Sunday-night dread.
- **Specific pressure points to watch for.** Year 7 transition (the biggest structural change), Year 8 onwards (friendships shift in ways that are hard to read if you process them slowly), puberty (harder on average for autistic young people), GCSE preparation (executive function plus exam stress), the post-16 transition.
- **Slow-building school refusal is worth taking seriously early.** It is rarely defiance. More often it is sensory overload, social exhaustion, masking-then-collapse, or a real unmet need that has been building for weeks.

What you can do

- **Work with the SENCo and one key pastoral adult.** Document SEN Support; push for an EHC needs assessment if the support gap is wide. Secure exam access arrangements (extra time, separate room, supervised rest breaks) well before they are needed.
- **Treat the school day as the load, and the rest of the time as recovery.** Quieter evenings, lighter weekends, fewer post-school questions. Protect access to the special interest; for many autistic young people that is the part that regulates them.
- **Consider assessment in adolescence if it has not yet happened.** A late diagnosis is still useful. It changes the support available and how the young person makes sense of themselves. NeuroFX offers private autism assessment for children and young people aged 6 and upwards, and combined ADHD and autism assessment where both are being considered.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to the SENCo if school is not working, the support is thin, or there is a pattern of meltdowns, shutdowns, school avoidance or rising anxiety. Speak to your GP if mental health is involved or a paediatric autism assessment is needed. NHS waiting times for paediatric autism services are often substantial; private assessment is a legitimate parallel route. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis or significant safety concern.

SOURCES

NICE CG170; DSM-5-TR; Lancet Commission on Autism (Lord et al. 2022); Hull et al. 2017 (J Autism Dev Disord); National Autistic Society

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

neurofx.co.uk · **info@neurofx.co.uk** · **0333 533 3303**