

If you're a parent reading this, the chances are that your child has been or will be diagnosed with an autism spectrum condition using the ADOS (Autism Diagnosis Observation Schedule) test.

This can leave you with the impression that autism is some sort of continuum.

Actually, the nature of autism isn't like that.

Rather than imagining it as a graph with 'high functioning' on the bottom and 'really severe' at the top, we prefer to think of autism as a series of ingredients. Whilst three core elements define autism, many other traits appear to different degrees or not at all depending on the person's condition, personality and environment.

To illustrate this, we've come up with the perfect image – the ice-cream sundae.

The Autism Sundae Dessert

(Or ASD to some)

WARNING!
This feature may cause a craving for ice-cream. We advise you to get some in the freezer before reading.

The Definition of Autism

Traditionally, in order to be diagnosed on the autism spectrum, a person has to have three key ingredients - here shown with the traditional Neapolitan ice-cream. You may hear this termed the 'triad of impairments' but AuKids has never liked that term very much, as it implies that a person is lacking. We're not sure that Alan Turing or Isaac Newton would have seen themselves as impaired, for instance.

The three key ingredients are:

- Difficulties with communication, here represented by **CHOCOLATE**.
- Difficulties with social interaction, here represented by **VANILLA**.
- Difficulties with imagination, here represented by **STRAWBERRY**.



Different Dollops



Why is autism so varied? Not everyone has equal dollops of ice-cream. Some may have less vanilla and more strawberry, some more chocolate but less vanilla. Some may have very little of all three. All combinations are possible. As long as the 'Neapolitan' combination is present, they have autism.

Although the Neapolitan combo remains with a person all their life, those dollops may well change in size over time. With some encouragement, children can develop communication skills and social skills. Imagination can also change and develop over time. The 'look' of their autism won't always be the same as the day they were diagnosed.

The Flake

People sometimes think that someone with autism comes with behavioural challenges as part and parcel of the condition.

Not so. That's why we've added a Flake here to represent behavioural difficulties. They can be added and taken away, just as with any other child. Lack of an ability to verbalise can cause frustration, but if you ease that frustration by providing other methods of communication, you are less likely to get behavioural problems as a result. So it's not just the 'chocolate' that's responsible.

Isolation as a result of social difficulties can result in poor self-esteem, which in turn can cause problems. Or a child may be perfectly happy playing by themselves, and frustrated at adults' attempts to 'make them' socialise. Challenging behaviour doesn't come with the territory and can be affected or change itself over time. The key is to know your child and to deal with any negative knock-on effects of the autism as soon as you can, by understanding the source of their behaviour.



Chocolate Sauce

It's very rare that you get a Neapolitan without anything added.

One common aspect of autism, now recognised as playing a major part in a child's behaviour, is sensory issues, which we will represent by chocolate sauce, as they impact on all of your ice-cream and not just some of it.

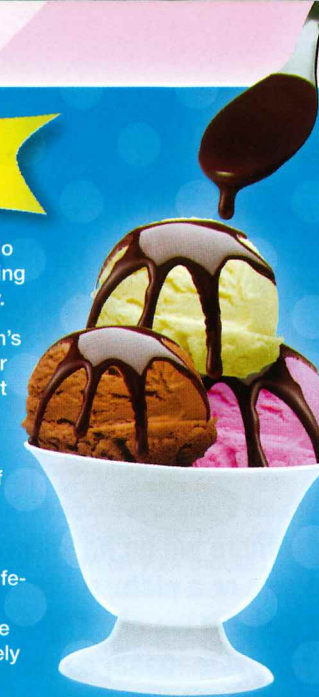
A child can have sensory integration issues without having autism. Sensory issues, however, almost always come with autism, so much so that in the recent diagnostic criteria they are given particular emphasis. The combination of sensory issues and the key ingredients of autism can impact on a child's behaviour.

For instance, social difficulties (vanilla) may appear more extreme if sensory issues mean that a person

gets overwhelmed by noise and crowds. How do you learn social rules when you're busy defending your nervous system from overload? Very tricky.

This is what makes it so hard to define a person's autism clearly. It might be hard to know whether you're looking at a large dollop of vanilla, or just a medium-sized dollop of vanilla with a lot of chocolate sauce on it!

It's not enough to assume that the core traits of autism are themselves responsible for a child's difficulties. Look for clues as to how a person's environment (sights, sounds, smells, tastes) is affecting their behaviour. Although autism is a life-long condition, helping a child with sensory difficulties – and any other challenges that make them uncomfortable – can really impact positively on their overall behaviour and wellbeing.



Strawberry Sauce



Our next ice-cream sundae comes with strawberry sauce. This represents other conditions that can occur alongside autism (referred to rather alarmingly by clinicians as comorbidity, another cheery term). We have chosen sauce because again, it 'covers' the autism to the extent that you may find it hard to work out what's caused by the autism and what's not.

If a child has learning difficulties, they may not play alongside their peers. How do you know whether what you're witnessing is problems with

social interaction (vanilla) or part of their learning difficulties (strawberry sauce)?

It's sometimes near impossible for even experienced professionals to assess what is causing a child's behaviour. What becomes more important is helping them with a particular difficulty whatever its source (or sauce...excuse the pun), whilst being aware that there are a number of possibilities impacting their learning style and considering them all.

The Sprinkles

Ice-cream sundaes can have all sorts of extras added which we haven't shown here. The need for routine and special interests are a particularly common aspect of autism.

And what about our favourite bit of all...the sprinkles?

Some autistic kids show great skills on top of

everything. Does your child have a good memory, enjoy numbers, love computers? A 'savant' – someone who is at genius level, would no doubt have a high degree of sprinkles AND a cherry on top. But there are still many kids with autism who aren't defined as geniuses but certainly have some fantastic skills, here represented by a dash of sprinkles.



No Two Sundaes Are the Same!

The Neapolitan sundae is presented in a glass – your kid's personality. Autism doesn't turn children into clones, of course! An outgoing child won't want to avoid other people but will perhaps need to practise their social skills to make them less vulnerable when approaching new people. A child who is naturally shy may feel inclined to isolate themselves more

and would need a double confidence booster to feel able to approach people because of their social difficulties.

So next time you meet a child with autism, remember our Autism Sundae Dessert.

What you're looking at isn't simply a score.



*Recent changes to the DSM-5 (diagnosis criteria) describe 'vanilla' and 'chocolate' as one element of autism and repetitive behaviour and routines as another. The World Health Organisation's classification criteria (ICD-10) largely used in this country, remains unchanged.