

The Assessment Kit (AK) for Autism

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Overview of the AK

Autism spectrum disorders constitute a condition which is recognized worldwide. Autism is as common in India and South Asia as it is elsewhere in the world, and makes no distinction between region, religion, rich or poor, even though many professionals continue to believe that autism is a 'Western' condition.

Although the characteristics of autism are generally evident in the first few years of life, the condition can go undetected or misdiagnosed for many years because of the varied manifestation of symptoms of autism. Without an accurate early diagnosis a child with autistic spectrum disorders can be condemned to a life of inadequate provision, their special needs not tackled and their future lives devalued. If undiagnosed their behaviors are misunderstood, may appear odd, and are often bullied or teased at school.

In India, diagnosis is often delayed because people who work with young children are not aware of the sometimes subtle characteristics of the disorder. Thus it is necessary to adopt a screening approach first. Several factors must be considered in contemplating the best approach to autism screening. These include the availability, cost, ease of administration of instruments with acceptable sensitivity/specificity, timing of well-child care visits for children, the amount of time available for these visits, the general approach to developmental screening and use of non-physician personnel (e.g., nurse practitioners, physical assistants, home visitors), cost-effectiveness, reimbursement, and cultural expectations of the population served regarding screening and diagnosis both in terms of content and process. In deciding on what age is most appropriate for autism-specific screening, it is most important to remember that different items may be needed for screening at different ages.

The Assessment Kit for Autism (AKA) is intended to ensure that more and more kids can be recognized early and receive timely interventions consistent with their individual needs, resources, priorities, and the concerns of their families. This guideline is intended to help families and professionals by offering information on autism and recommendations based on scientific evidence and expert clinical opinion on early screening of children at risk or suspected of having autism through structured and unstructured interactions with children and intensive interviews with the caregivers.

The AK has three components:

- 1 A “**quick scan**” of child behaviours, completed by asking parent or persons who spend most time with the child a set of five questions.
- 2 Suggested **activities** for the professional to conduct that will provide more information on the child’s behaviours.
- 3 Suggested **questions** for people who spend the most time with the child to get information about usual patterns of behaviour and activity, since all the relevant information may not be evident in one sitting with the child.

The AKA is *not* a diagnostic instrument, but is a screening tool intended to identify children at risk for ASD. It includes a list of questions; suggestions on structured and unstructured activities and a collection of toys and an assortment of items that would be of interest to most young children across a wide age range and irrespective of the child’s gender, educational, cultural and socio-economic background.

Extra care has been taken to include objects that are child–friendly, familiar, easily available, inexpensive and require no complicated manipulations for either the child or the administrator. The administrator may replenish the items as required.

Development of the AK was supported through multiple sources, including the De Samvirkende Invalideorganisationer Denmark. The AK is not yet available for distribution but please contact Dr. Nidhi Singhal at Dr.Nidhi.Singhal@gmail.com for further information.

About AFA

Established in 1991, Action for Autism (AFA) has worked with thousands of children with autism and their families. Very often, by the time the children reached AFA, the children and their parents have spent significant time and physical, financial and emotional resources, looking around, seeking answers that explained if and how their child was different. This tool has been developed to enable professionals to identify children who are developing differently even when they are as young as 18 months old and hasten the referral of children at risk to specialists for further evaluations. More information about AFA is available at www.autism-india.org.