



CALIFORNIA AUTISM FAQs

The California Autism FAQs answer common questions about autism and services for individuals. For more information or questions, please call 833-815-2337 or email autism@dds.ca.gov.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Q1. What is autism?

A1. Autism is a developmental disability characterized by social, communication, and behavioral challenges. Autism is one of the developmental disabilities that qualify for services and supports in accordance with the [Lanterman Act \(Welfare and Institutions Code 4512\(a\)\(1\)\)](#). To learn more about autism, screening, diagnosis, prevalence, data, and statistics, click this link: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) Autism Spectrum Disorder \(en Español\)](#)

Q2. I have concerns about my child's development, or I believe they may have autism. Who can I contact?

A2. If you have concerns about your infant or toddler's development, discuss them with their doctor. To learn if your infant or toddler may benefit from early intervention or specialized education services through California's Early Start Program please see the [Reasons for Concern-English \(ca.gov\)](#) brochure. For more information regarding Early Start services, please contact the Early Start Baby Line at 800-515-BABY (800-515-2229) or earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

If you have concerns about your child or adolescent's development, discuss them with their doctor. Your child or adolescent may be assessed and evaluated for eligibility through your local regional center. Find your local regional center by clicking this link: [Regional Center Lookup](#). For more information regarding autism, please contact the Autism Helpline at 833-815-2337 or autism@dds.ca.gov.

Q3. What is the Autism Helpline?

A3. The DDS Autism Services Branch operates an email inbox and phone line that provides information, resources, technical assistance, and answers questions related to autism from individuals, families, system partners, and other partners that support individuals with autism. The Autism Helpline can be contacted by phone at 833-815-2337 or by email at autism@dds.ca.gov.

Q4. My child was just diagnosed with autism. How do I get services?

A4. Your child may be eligible for services through your local regional center. To access regional center services, begin by finding the regional center that services your area by clicking this link: [Regional Center Lookup](#). To apply for services, you may call your regional center's Intake Line by phone or email their Intake Inbox to communicate with an intake coordinator. Each regional center has their own individual intake phone number, email, and application for services that the intake coordinator will guide you through.

REGIONAL CENTERS

Q5. What is a regional center?

A5. Regional centers are a statewide network of 21 community-based, non-profit agencies. The regional centers provide assessments, determine eligibility for services, and offer case management services for individuals with developmental disabilities (including autism). Regional centers also develop, purchase, and coordinate services. Find the regional center that services your area by clicking this link: [Regional Center Lookup](#).

Q6. Who can make a referral to a regional center?

A6. Anyone can make a referral to a regional center including childcare providers, teachers and school staff, parents and family members, and health care professionals. Individuals may also self-refer themselves to the regional center.

Q7. Where can I find support and additional resources for navigating the regional center system?

A7. Each regional center has a Community Navigator Program (CNP) in partnership with the Family Resource Centers Network of California (FRCNCA). Based on the community health worker model, community navigators work 1:1 with individuals and families providing support in accessing and utilizing regional center and generic resources. You can find the Community Navigator Program (CNP) that services your area by clicking this link: [Community Navigator Program - CA Department of Developmental Services](#).

Q8. Where do I get services?

A8. Services are available throughout California. If you are determined eligible for regional center services, services can be accessed through your local regional center by working with your Service Coordinator. If you have an autism diagnosis but are determined ineligible for regional center services, you can contact your doctor or health care plan, county office of education, local school district, and local health or social service agencies to find out what services are available in your area.

ELIGIBILITY

Q9. Is an autism diagnosis alone enough to become eligible for regional center services?

A9. To be eligible for services under the Lanterman Act, a person must have a disability that begins before the individual's 18th birthday, that is expected to continue indefinitely, and is a substantial disability for that individual. Qualifying conditions include intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, and other disabling conditions closely resembling intellectual disability or requiring similar treatment as individuals with intellectual disability ([Section 4512\(a\)\(1\) of the California Welfare and Institutions Code](#)). Eligibility is established through an assessment performed by regional centers. You can learn more about eligibility for services here: [Regional Center Eligibility and Services](#).

Q10. Can I become eligible for regional center services if I was diagnosed with autism after age 18?

A10. To be eligible for services through the Regional Center, an individual must have a disability that *originates* before their 18th birthday (WIC 4512), but the disability does not have to be diagnosed prior to age 18. An individual not diagnosed until adulthood can seek regional center services and can be referred for intake and assessment. In cases where an individual has been determined not eligible for services by a regional center (or acquires a disability after age 18), an individual may be eligible for services through the CA Department of Rehabilitation, which offers a variety of programs and services to adults with disabilities including education, employment, living skills, and assistive technology. More information can be found through their website: [Home Page - CA Department of Rehabilitation](#) as well as their office/service locator: [Contact Us - CA Department of Rehabilitation](#). For specific inquiries, they can be contacted by phone at:

Voice: 1-916-324-1313

Voice: 1-800-952-5544

TTY: 1-844-729-2800

They may also be eligible for In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) through the Department of Social Services: [In-Home Supportive Services \(IHSS\) Program](#).

Q11. What can I do if eligibility or services are denied?

A11. If denied eligibility or services, the fair hearing process is a process for resolving disagreements between the regional center and individuals served. Under the fair hearing process, disagreements may be about services, eligibility or any decision or action of the regional center with which you disagree. The fair hearing process may include an informal meeting, mediation, and a state level hearing with an Administrative Law Judge. Information on the fair hearing process, a brochure and necessary forms to file for a fair hearing are available from your local regional center or can be found here: [Lanterman Act Eligibility and Service Appeals - CA Department of Developmental Services](#)

Q12. My child is currently in Early Start. How can they become eligible for lifelong Lanterman services?

A12. Your child should be assessed by the regional center at least 90 days prior to the date they turn three for purposes of determining their ongoing eligibility for regional center services. That assessment will determine if your child has a qualifying developmental disability. If the regional center determines that your child does not meet the eligibility criteria for a developmental disability, the regional center will assess your child for provisional eligibility for regional center services.

Q13. My child receives regional center services under Provisional Eligibility. What happens when they turn five?

A13. Regional Centers are required to assess your child for eligibility for services under the Lanterman Act at least 90 days prior to turning five years of age. If denied eligibility, the fair hearing process is a process for resolving disagreements between the regional center and individuals served. Under the fair hearing process, disagreements may be about services, eligibility or any decision or action of the regional center with which you disagree. The fair hearing process may include an informal meeting, mediation, and a state level hearing with an Administrative Law Judge. Current services may be continued during the appeal process if the request for a hearing is received or postmarked within 10 days after the receipt of the notice of action. This process is known as “aid paid pending.” Information on the fair hearing process, a brochure and necessary forms to file for a fair hearing are available from your local regional center or can be found here: [Lanterman Act Eligibility and Service Appeals - CA Department of Developmental Services.](#)”

Q14. If I haven't been contacted for an assessment and my child is turning age 3 or 5 in less than 90 days, what should I do?

A14. Contact your child's assigned Service Coordinator.

Q15. What is Service Coordination and what is the role of a Service Coordinator?

A15. "Service coordination" means assistance provided by a Service Coordinator whose role it is to coordinate and advocate for services and supports that help the individual and their family gain access to services identified on the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individual Program Plan (IPP).