



**Constellation**  
Healthcare



# **Understanding the Supports:** Health Services for Families Navigating Autism in Ireland

# Introduction

There is a wide range of health services and support for autistic children and young people in Ireland. They're there to provide a network to help to unlock your child's full potential and help them to thrive.

This resource gives you an overview of these services so you can understand what's available, when you might need them and how to access them. It covers:

- Assessment of Need
- HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNT)
- Local Health Centres
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- Primary Care Services

Every child and family is different, so not every service will be relevant or appropriate for everyone. Some services may depend on your location or your child's specific needs. In each case, we've given information on how to access each of the services – this might be directly or via another healthcare professional. You can use also this route to get the most accurate and up-to-date information for your situation and see if the service is right for your child.

As you start to engage with the services available you are likely to encounter many different acronyms and specialist terms, which can leave you feeling confused. You'll find a brief glossary at the end of this resource to give you a quick-start guide to the terms you might come across.



# Health Services and Support for Autistic Children and Young People in Ireland

## 1. Assessment of Need

An Assessment of Need (AON) is a process set out in the Disability Act 2005, for children who have a disability or likely to have a disability that significantly impacts their life.

**The Disability Act 2005 states that a disability must be:**

- Permanent or likely to be permanent.
- Results in significant ongoing difficulties.
- Requires continued support for life.
- Stops participation in learning, work, relationships.

An AON will identify whether a child or person has a disability, the nature and extent of the disability, any health and education needs arising from that disability and what services are required to meet their needs and what services are required to meet those needs. It can be carried out by the HSE or may be outsourced to a private provider who has been commissioned by the HSE.

You don't have to get an AON to access HSE services for your child. You can apply directly to services outside the AON process.

### Who Can Make an Application for an Assessment of Need?

You can apply for an AON if you have concerns about your child's development (e.g., relating to not meeting developmental milestones, autism, language, motor skills).

You can apply for an AON on behalf of a child if you are their:

- Parent
- Legal guardian
- Personal advocate

If you are aged over 16, you can apply for your own AON.

You do not need to do an AON to access health services.



### How to Apply for an Assessment of Need

To apply for an AON, you need to fill in the Assessment of Need application form and send it to your local Assessment Officer. You will find the form and the details of your local Assessment Officer via the [Disability Assessment page of the HSE website](#).

## 2. HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) services are provided by the HSE.

CAMHS services are available for young people under 18 years of age who are experiencing moderate to severe mental disorders that affect their ability to function in day-to-day activities. CAMHS services also support children with ADHD, even though it is considered to be a neurodivergent condition not a mental health condition. This is because ADHD is often supported with prescription medication, which a psychiatrist needs to oversee.

CAMHS services are provided through multidisciplinary community-based teams and regional hospital units.

### **The support they provide can include:**

- Psychiatric and psychological assessment
- Developing co-produced individual care plans for individual or family therapy
- Providing multidisciplinary interventions to treat mental disorders or conditions
- Medication management
- Crisis intervention and safety planning
- Liaising with schools and other services such as Children's Disability Network Teams, educational and mental health services.
- Discharge and after-care planning following improvement

CAMHS does not provide specific support for autistic young people, although it may support them if they are experiencing mental health disorders and ADHD, working in collaboration with another service like primary care or a CDNT

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in Intellectual Disability (CAMHS-ID)**

CAMHS-ID is a specialist branch of CAMHS. It supports young people with a moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disability AND significant mental health needs or ADHD.

CAMHS-ID teams are multidisciplinary. They consist of Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Clinical Nurse Specialists, Social Workers, Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists and Administrators.

They work closely with other professionals such as those in CDNTs to ensure joined-up care for your child.

### **How to Access Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**

A referral to CAMHS must be made by a healthcare professional. This is usually your child's GP, paediatrician or the emergency services.

### 3. Children's Disability Network Teams

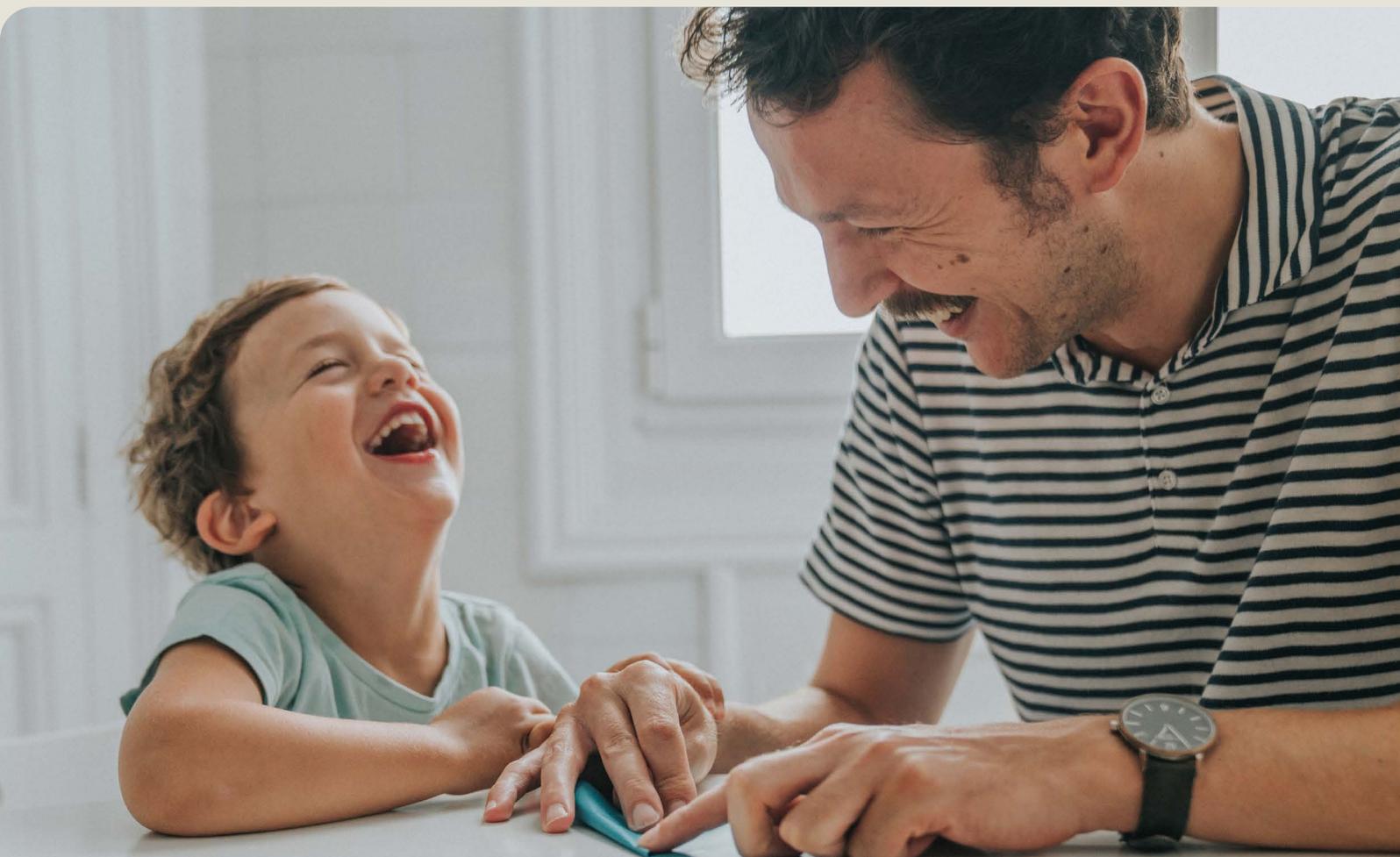
Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) provide support for children and young people (up to age 18) who have complex needs related to a wide range of disabilities. They work with families and children who need a lot of day-to-day support due to an illness, disability or sensory impairment. This includes intellectual disability and global developmental delay. It also includes autism with complex needs.

A CDNT is a multidisciplinary team of healthcare professionals and may include:

- occupational therapists (OTs)
- speech and language therapists (SLTs)
- psychologists
- physiotherapists
- social workers
- clinical nurse specialists

CDNT's may also have access to:

- behaviour support specialists
- dietitians
- early years practitioners/ early years nurse practitioners
- family support workers
- therapy assistants



The team members work together to provide therapeutic services and supports for your child. This can include help with language, learning, practical everyday skills (such as toileting, dressing and feeding), social relationships, play, motor skills, visual impairment (including blindness) and auditory impairment (including deafness).

They keep each other up to date with your child's progress and changing needs.

Your CDNT will work closely with you and your family. They also work with your child's school and other organisations and services as appropriate.

When you start with your team, your CDNT will work with you to create an Individual Family Support Plan (IFSP). This plan sets out the goals you and your child wish to work on.

In some parts of the country, the service is provided by the HSE. In other parts, the service is provided by other organisations, including Enable Ireland, St. Michael's House, Avista, the Brothers of Charity and the Central Remedial Clinic. [You can find your local CDNT here.](#)

CDNTs have replaced the old Early Intervention Teams, which worked with children aged 0 – 5, and School Age Disability Teams, which worked with children aged 6 – 18 years.

### **How to Access Your Local Children's Disability Network Team**

You can refer your child to your local CDNT if you are their parent or legal guardian. Your child does not need a diagnosis or an Assessment of Need. [You will find the forms you need on the HSE website.](#)

If your child's needs would be best met by a CDNT, your child will automatically be referred to your local team after an Assessment of Need.

Your child may also be referred to your local team by their GP or paediatrician.



## 4. Local Health Centres

Your Local Health Centre is a broad entry point to HSE community health and personal social services. This includes public health nurses and community support services who can guide you on how to access other services in your area, including those relating to autism and intellectual disability.

### How to Access Your Local Health Centre

You can [find details for your Local Health Centre on the HSE website](#).

## 5. National Council for Special Education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) provides support to schools, families and professionals.

It employs Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) who support parents and guardians by:

- providing information, establishing special classes and engaging with other professionals working with your child
- advising and supporting around the availability of special classes, special schools and other educational supports, including Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)
- processing transport and assistive technology applications
- providing advice and tips on the transition from preschool to school from primary school to post primary school and onto adult services

### How to Contact Your Local Special Educational Needs Organiser

Every school has an assigned SENO. You can find the SENO for your child's school by using the [School Information Map on the NCSE website](#) or emailing the NCSE at [info@ncse.ie](mailto:info@ncse.ie).

## 6. Primary Care Services

Primary care services include:

- Community Health Doctors
- Occupational Therapists
- Physiotherapists
- Psychologists
- Public Health Nurses
- Social Workers
- Speech and Language Therapists

Primary care services are the community based services offering support for children with non-complex needs, which means they need support in a single specialist area. For example, if your child has a speech delay, a Speech and Language Therapist will work with them.

If your child has needs in multiple areas, they will be seen by their local **Children's Disability Network Team**.

### **How to Access Your Local Primary Care Service**

You may view the Community Healthcare Network or search with your [Eircode here](#)

You can refer your child to your local primary care service. [You will find the referral forms here.](#)

Your child can also be referred to a primary care service by their GP or other healthcare professional, social care professional or educational professional, assessment officer or case manager. They will need your permission to do this.



# Glossary of Terms

As you engage with health services and supports for your child, you are likely to hear and read many acronyms and technical terms. We've provided a short glossary of the ones you're most likely to come across here.

## AON

Assessment of Need. It's a process to identify your child's health needs and what services are required to meet those needs. **Find out more.**

## ASD

Autism Spectrum Disorder is the formal clinical term that may appear in assessment reports or research. However, many autistic people and families prefer the terms "autism" or "autistic", as they feel the word "disorder" does not reflect their experience or identity. We often refer to someone as being autistic or having autism. But Autism is not a single, uniform experience. It is a spectrum, meaning it is different for every autistic person. Some autistic people may need very little or only occasional support, while others may require daily support or assistance from a parent, caregiver or support person. All of these experiences are valid, and each autistic person brings their own strengths, needs and ways of being in the world.

## CAMHS

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. These are services provided by the HSE for young people under 18 years of age who are experiencing moderate to severe mental disorders (and ADHD) that affect their ability to function in day-to-day activities. People with a mild intellectual disability can attend CAMHS. **Find out more.**

## CAMHS-ID

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in Intellectual Disability is a specialist branch of the HSE's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. The service supports young people with both a moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disability and significant mental health needs. **Find out more.**

## CDNT

Children's Disability Network Team. They provide support for children and young people (up to age 18) with complex needs, including autism. **Find out more.**

## Fine Motor Skills

Fine motor skills are the small movements involved in things like picking up a pencil or picking up a small object. If your child has fine motor skills needs they may work with an Occupational Therapist.

## Gross Motor Skills

Gross motor skills are skills that involve using the large muscles of the body. We need gross motor skills for things like walking, running, jumping and skipping. If your child has gross motor skills needs they may work with a Physiotherapist.

## IFSP

Individual Family Support Plan. Your CDNT will work with you to create an IFSP. It sets out the goals you wish to work on for your child. **Find out more.**

## Multidisciplinary Team

A multidisciplinary team is a group of healthcare professionals from different specialisms. A multidisciplinary team might consist of Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists. Each member of the team works with a person, focusing on the issue they specialise in. A care plan makes sure every member of the team understands the full picture and specific goals.

You may sometimes see a multidisciplinary team referred to as an 'MDT'.

## NCSE

The National Council for Special Education. It is an independent body within the Department of Education that provides support to schools, families and professionals. **Find out more.**

## OT

Occupational Therapist or Occupational Therapy. OTs specialise in supporting **fine motor skills** and the sensory system.

## PT

Physiotherapist or Physiotherapy. Physiotherapists work to support people with **gross motor skills** needs.

## SENO

Special Educational Needs Organiser. SENOs are employed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to support families of children and young people with additional needs in school. **Find out more.**

## SLT

Speech and Language Therapist or Speech and Language Therapy. SLTs help children who have speech, language, voice, fluency and social communication differences and difficulties.

## SNA

Special Needs Assistants. SNAs are school-based care support staff who help students who have additional and significant care needs. Funding for SNAs comes from the Department of Education/ NCSE.

## About Constellation Healthcare

Constellation Healthcare is one of Ireland's leading providers of neurodevelopmental assessments and supports. Our assessments are carried out by expert Clinical, Educational and Counselling Psychologists, along with CORU-registered Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists, and Physiotherapists – using HSE-recognised, evidence-based tools. We deliver expert care across the Republic of Ireland, and are trusted by families and by public sector partners such as the HSE.





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always.**

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