
Understanding Your

ASD Evaluation at Sticky Brain Studio™

A Guide for Families, Teens, and Adults

Why developmental stage matters · What to expect · Your questions answered

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Psychology Services Through a Neurodiversity-Affirming Lens

About This Guide

At Sticky Brain Studio, we believe that informed families and individuals are empowered ones. This guide was created to help you understand why autism evaluations are tailored by developmental stage, and what that means for you or your loved one.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental experience, not a list of deficits. The way social communication, sensory experiences, and self-regulation present changes meaningfully across the lifespan. A thoughtful evaluation considers where a person is developmentally, what their environment expects of them, and how their unique profile of strengths and challenges shapes their day-to-day life.

Our Approach at Every Age

Every SBS evaluation is grounded in the same core values:

- **Evidence-based:** We follow current clinical research and established diagnostic standards.
- **Neurodiversity-affirming:** We assess the whole person, including strengths, not just challenges.
- **Comprehensive:** We gather information from multiple sources and settings before drawing conclusions.
- **Thoughtful:** We carefully consider differential and co-occurring explanations before any diagnostic conclusion.

Why a Thoughtful Evaluation Matters

Autism is increasingly recognized across ages, genders, and backgrounds, but it is also frequently missed or misidentified. Many individuals (especially girls, women, BIPOC clients, and those who mask their differences) are identified later in life, sometimes after years of being misdiagnosed or misunderstood. A careful evaluation honors each person's story, considers other explanations that may overlap with autism, and produces clarity that leads to genuine support.

An evaluation is not about labeling. It is about understanding. The goal is to help you or your loved one make sense of lifelong experiences, access appropriate supports, and move forward with self-knowledge and confidence.

How to Use This Guide

The next section walks through each of our four developmental bands. Each one explains why that stage requires its own evaluation approach, and what families or individuals can generally expect. Find the section that matches your child's age, or your own, and read on.

Why Developmental Stage Matters in ASD Evaluation

Autism is present from early development, but the way it shows up changes across the lifespan. What is clearly identifiable in early childhood may look very different in a high-masking adult. Each band below describes why that window of development requires its own clinical lens.

1 Band 1: Early Childhood

Ages 2–5

Early childhood is when many features of autism first become observable: differences in social engagement, communication development, play patterns, sensory responses, and routines. At this stage, parents and caregivers are often the first to notice that something feels different, even when they cannot yet name what it is.

Our focus at this stage is on understanding the whole child: how they connect, how they communicate, how they experience their world, and what they need to thrive. Early identification is not about rushing toward a label. It is about opening the door to early supports that can make a meaningful difference in the years that follow.

Parents and caregivers are our primary source of developmental information at this age. Input from preschool teachers, early intervention providers, and pediatricians is also essential. We take care to consider other explanations, including language delays, sensory differences, hearing concerns, and trauma, before drawing diagnostic conclusions.

2 Band 2: School-Age

Ages 6–12

School-age is when the social, academic, and behavioral demands of structured environments make differences in social communication and self-regulation more visible. Children who appeared to be doing well in earlier years may begin to struggle with peer relationships, classroom expectations, or transitions. Others have been identified earlier and are now navigating the complexity of school-age life.

At this stage, we gather information from both home and school, because autism shows up in patterns across settings. A child's teacher, school counselor, or therapist often holds important pieces of the picture. We also include the child's own perspective when developmentally appropriate, because how a child understands their own experience matters.

Differential diagnosis is especially important at this age. Anxiety, ADHD, learning differences, language disorders, and trauma can all share features with autism, and many children present with more than one of these. A careful evaluation helps ensure that the right supports are identified, rather than addressing the wrong concern.

3 Band 3: Adolescents

Ages 13–17

Adolescence brings new social complexity, identity development, and academic demands. For autistic teens, this period can feel both clarifying and harder. Some teens have been identified for years and are working out what autism means for who they are becoming. Others are reaching adolescence with growing self-awareness that something has always been different, often after years of anxiety, exhaustion, or feeling like they do not quite fit.

Masking is a particularly important consideration at this stage. Many adolescents, especially girls, transgender and nonbinary teens, and BIPOC teens, work hard to blend in socially, often at great cost to their mental health. A thoughtful evaluation recognizes masking as part of the clinical picture rather than as evidence against autism.

Teens are full participants in their own evaluation. Their voice, their experience, and their self-understanding are central, not secondary. We also take seriously the emotional weight that many late-identified teens carry, including the relief of finally being understood and the grief of years spent feeling unseen.

4 Band 4: Adults

Ages 18+

Late identification is one of the most rapidly growing areas in autism clinical work. Many adults reaching out for an evaluation have spent decades knowing that something was different, often after being diagnosed with anxiety, depression, ADHD, or burnout without ever feeling like the full picture had been captured. For others, having a child evaluated raised questions about their own experience for the first time.

Adult evaluation requires confirming that features were present from early development, since autism is a neurodevelopmental experience that begins in childhood. This means gathering developmental history from records, family, or both. We also consider the full clinical picture, including anxiety, mood, trauma, ADHD, and life context, because adult presentations are rarely isolated.

We are especially attentive to high-masking presentations, which are common in adults who have spent a lifetime adapting to environments that did not understand them. We use measures and interview approaches designed to capture these presentations, and we hold space for the emotional experience of late identification, which can include relief, grief, anger, and a process of rewriting one's own story.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do you evaluate differently based on developmental stage?

Because autism presents differently across the lifespan, and what is clinically meaningful at one age may look quite different at another. A 4-year-old who lines up toys is doing something developmentally typical; a 30-year-old describing a lifetime of social exhaustion and rigid routines is telling a different story. Tailoring our approach by stage ensures that our evaluations are accurate, fair, and clinically meaningful.

How long will the evaluation take?

It depends on the pathway that fits your situation. A screening consultation may be completed in one or two visits. A focused diagnostic evaluation typically involves an intake, an assessment session, and a feedback session. Comprehensive evaluations are longer, with multiple appointments tailored to the questions being addressed. Dr. O will walk you through what to expect at the start of the process.

Will my child have to attend every appointment?

For young children, the first appointment is typically with parents only. Children attend a separate session where Dr. O can spend time with them directly. For teens and adults, your own participation in the evaluation is central, and family or caregiver input is included with your consent.

What if the evaluation does not lead to an autism diagnosis?

That is a completely valid outcome. Not every evaluation results in an autism diagnosis, and that is part of the process working as it should. If autism is not supported by the evaluation, Dr. O will share what was found, discuss what may be contributing, and help you think through next steps. Many clients who do not meet criteria for autism still leave with greater clarity and a meaningful path forward.

Can autism present differently in girls, women, and people of color?

Yes, and this matters deeply. Autism has historically been studied in white boys, which means that girls, women, transgender and nonbinary individuals, and people of color are often identified later or missed entirely. Presentations may include strong masking, internalized differences, intense interests that look socially typical on the surface, and burnout that has been mislabeled as anxiety or depression. Our evaluation is designed to recognize autism across the full range of presentations.

Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

Does an autism diagnosis define a person?

No. Autism is one part of who a person is, alongside their strengths, values, relationships, interests, and experiences. We approach autism as a way of being, not a disorder to be fixed. An evaluation provides language and clarity. It does not change who you or your loved one are.

What does support look like after a diagnosis?

Support depends on age, goals, and individual profile. It can include therapy, parent coaching, school accommodations, executive functioning coaching, social-communication support, sensory strategies, and connection to community. Following an evaluation, Dr. O will discuss what the findings mean and walk through options that fit you or your loved one.

Will schools, colleges, or workplaces accept this evaluation?

In most cases, yes. Our focused and comprehensive evaluations include the written documentation that schools, colleges, and testing agencies typically require for accommodations. Adults seeking workplace supports also receive documentation suitable for that purpose. If you have a specific purpose in mind, let us know at the start so the evaluation is designed to meet those requirements.

Do you offer ADOS-2 testing?

We are continually expanding our assessment tools to ensure each evaluation is matched to the client's needs. During your consultation, Dr. O will discuss which observational and standardized measures are most appropriate, and whether additional structured tools are indicated for your situation.

What if there are also possible ADHD, learning, or anxiety concerns?

Many of our clients present with overlapping concerns, which is exactly why our Comprehensive Neurodevelopmental Evaluation exists. When the clinical picture is complex, we recommend starting with that pathway so all relevant areas can be addressed in one integrated process. Dr. O will help determine the right scope during your consultation.

Ready to Take the Next Step?

We know that deciding to pursue an evaluation is a meaningful step. Whether you are seeking answers for your child, your teen, or yourself, Sticky Brain Studio is here to guide you through the process with clarity, care, and expertise.

EVALUATION OPTION	BEST FOR	INVESTMENT
Insurance-Based Diagnostic Assessment	Clear concerns, treatment planning, families who prefer to start with insurance	Insurance billed when eligible
ASD Screening and Consultation	Early questions, mild traits, professional guidance, peace of mind	\$500
Focused ASD Diagnostic Evaluation	Diagnostic clarity, school or college accommodations, workplace documentation	\$1,400 – \$1,750 · Payment plans available
Comprehensive Neurodevelopmental Evaluation	Possible co-occurring ADHD, learning, language, or complex developmental concerns	\$2,200 – \$3,800+ depending on scope

Continuing Support with Sticky Brain Studio™

An evaluation is often just the beginning. Many children, teens, and adults benefit from targeted skill-building and strategic support after the assessment process.

CLINICAL SUPPORTS

- Executive functioning coaching
- Parent coaching and consultation
- School and workplace consultations
- Follow-up support visits

SELF-PACED RESOURCES

- Workbooks for kids, teens, and adults
- Parent guides and skill-building tools
- Anxiety, EF, and emotional regulation resources
- Available at stickybrainstudio.org

Schedule a Consultation

Not sure which option is the right fit? During your consultation, Dr. O will review your concerns and help you determine the best next step.

Online: stickybrainstudio.clientsecure.me
Phone: (608) 892-8115
Email: info@dropsych.com

From clarity to confident next steps, Sticky Brain Studio is here to support the full journey.