

Can autism be assessed if a child cannot speak during the assessment?

Yes. A child does **not** need to speak in order for an autism assessment to take place.

Autism is not diagnosed by how many questions a child answers in clinic. Diagnosis is based on a comprehensive understanding of the child's social communication, interaction, behaviour, sensory processing and developmental history, gathered from multiple sources.

If a child is unable to speak during an assessment because of selective mutism, anxiety or nervous system overwhelm, clinicians should adapt their assessment rather than conclude that autism cannot be assessed.

This may include placing greater emphasis on:

- A detailed developmental history from parents or carers.
- Observations of the child's non-verbal communication, play and social interaction.
- Information from school or nursery.
- Videos of the child in familiar environments, where appropriate.
- Multiple assessment sessions if trust needs time to develop.
- Clinical observations across different settings.

Standardised tools, including the ADOS, can be very helpful when they are appropriate for the child. However, no single assessment tool should be used in isolation, and clinicians should always consider whether a child's anxiety or inability to speak has affected the validity of the assessment.

Perhaps most importantly, clinicians should ask:

"What evidence can I gather about this child's underlying social communication profile?"

rather than

"Can I complete every part of this assessment?"

Children with selective mutism can and do receive autism diagnoses. Good assessment is flexible, neurodiversity-affirming and adapted to the child's individual presentation, recognising that communication is far more than spoken words.