

How to seek an ASD assessment via the:

1. Public Health System:

Obtaining an ASD assessment for your teenager through the public health system in South Australia will take a very long time, because the public health system is so overstretched, especially in the area of mental health.

If you want to obtain a diagnosis of ASD for your teenager (*which you will need in order to obtain NDIS funding to pay for your teenager to receive the correct, and often private, ASD specialised support/treatment/therapy that your teenager will need for the long term*), if you can manage a one-off payment of about \$600.00 to \$1,000.00 for an ASD assessment, then I strongly recommend that you seek an assessment either through a private clinic or clinician, or Autism SA, rather than through the public health system.

If you simply cannot afford to pay for an ASD assessment, and need to use Medicare, and the public health system, then read on.

For an undiagnosed teenager to obtain an ASD assessment through the public health system in South Australia, basically, they would need to have reached a stage of such severe psychological distress that they are experiencing one or more of the following symptoms:

- Self-harming behaviours;
- Having suicidal thoughts/attempted suicide;
- Symptoms of psychosis, such as hearing voices, or seeing things that aren't there;
- Have become unable to eat, to the point that they are at risk of dying of starvation.

If your teenager is unconscious, struggling to breath, bleeding heavily, or there's an immediate risk of them harming themselves, phone 000.

If your teenager is experiencing a mental health emergency, phone the Mental Health Triage on 13 14 65, or the Kids Help Line on 1800 55 1800.

If your teenager is experiencing, or has experienced, any of the symptoms listed in the dot points on the previous page, and/or if you have noticed that your teenager is experiencing ‘certain issues’, as described on the title page of this website, to have them assessed for ASD through the public health system, there are two options that I know of in South Australia. Both of these come under the Women’s and Children’s Health Network (WCHN):

1. It is possible to obtain an ASD assessment through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). This will be a single assessment:

- i. Book an appointment for your teenager with their GP. When booking the appointment, tell them it is for a Mental Health Care Plan (MHCP).

At the appointment, describe your teenager’s symptoms in as much detail as possible. Stress the severity of your teenager’s symptoms. Tell the GP that you want to have them assessed for ASD, that you feel they need to see a psychiatrist, and ask that they refer your teenager to CAMHS.

To create a MHCP, the GP will have to ask your teenager a series of questions, and your teenager will have to complete one or two brief, multiple-choice type questionnaires.

- ii. Depending on the severity of your teenager’s symptoms, their GP might not refer them to CAMHS immediately. They might first undertake investigations to rule out other possible underlying causes for your teenager’s ‘certain issues’, and perform a screening test or informal assessment of your teenager, for ASD. Some GPs will be better than others in this regard. Some GPs might have a special interest in the area of ASD, but others will not. Even if a GP has a special interest in ASD, they still might not have a great level of knowledge or understanding of what I sometimes like to call Aspergers*.

*(*I explain my use of the term ‘Aspergers’ under the section on my website called, “What do I mean by “Autism Spectrum Disorder, or what some people call Aspergers”?”)*

- iii. Further, there is a good chance that your teenager's GP will refer them to a psychologist at Headspace*, who will have a number of sessions with your teenager, over a number of weeks or months, to try to assess and assist them with their 'certain issues'. *(*Headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health. FYI, at Headspace, they refer to psychologists simply as 'clinicians').*

However, the psychologists at Headspace do NOT have the appropriate training or expertise to treat teenagers with ASD, or even to recognise ASD in undiagnosed teenagers. They certainly will not be able to diagnose ASD, and will probably not even refer your teenager for an ASD assessment elsewhere.

Headspace does have psychiatrists, but they do NOT do ASD assessments. If your teenager has ASD (either diagnosed, or undiagnosed), and they end up being referred to a psychiatrist at Headspace, it will likely be because they are experiencing symptoms of psychosis.

What will likely happen is that the psychiatrist will talk to your teenager about their symptoms of psychosis and prescribe them with antipsychotic and/or antidepressant medication. No-one at Headspace will address your teenager's ASD, which is what is causing them to experience the symptoms of psychosis in the first place.

If your teenager is referred to a psychiatrist at Headspace, it is possible that the psychiatrist might eventually refer them to be assessed for ASD by either CAMHS or the Women's and Children's Hospital Child Development Unit. However, this will not occur until after your teenager has been through various therapy programs, involving multiple different clinicians and support workers at Headspace, over many months.

If your teenager's GP refers them to Headspace, after they have had only a few sessions with one psychologist there, return to your teenager's GP, tell them you are not satisfied that Headspace is addressing your teenager's ASD issues, that their mental health symptoms are getting worse, and that you want them referred to CAMHS, as per your initial request.

- iv. If/when your teenager's GP does refer them to CAMHS, someone from CAMHS should phone you with an appointment time. If you do not hear from them within a few days, phone CAMHS on **1300 222 647** to chase this up.

- v. At the first appointment at CAMHS, describe your teenager's symptoms in as much detail as possible. Stress the severity of your teenager's symptoms. Tell them that you want to have them assessed for ASD, and that you feel they need to see a psychiatrist.

- vi. Depending on the severity of your teenager's symptoms, they might not get to see a psychiatrist at CAMHS immediately. They will probably see a social worker first. Then they might be referred for sessions with a psychologist. If your teenager starts having sessions with someone at CAMHS, make sure you ask what that person's qualifications are, i.e., are they a social worker, psychologist, or something else? They won't automatically make this clear.

- vii. If your teenager's symptoms are still getting worse, then they might finally be referred to see the psychiatrist at CAMHS, who might prescribe antipsychotic and/or antidepressant medication. Then, if your teenager's symptoms are still getting worse, the psychiatrist might do an ASD assessment. (It's possible that CAMHS might refer your teenager to WCH CDU – I explain WCH CDU at point 2 below, on the next page).

This whole process will likely take at least **14 to 18 months**. However, it is not the fault of CAMHS, but due to the extremely high demand, and not enough resources to meet the demand.

CAMHS can only treat children until they are 18, but at least if they have been able to provide your teenager with a diagnosis of ASD, you can obtain NDIS funding for them. NDIS funding should enable you to pay for your teenager to have regular, ongoing sessions with a private psychologist who actually has expertise in ASD, and in particular, what I sometimes like to call Aspergers.

CAMHS has numerous centres throughout South Australia. To find out more about CAMHS, or to find your nearest centre, I recommend you take a look at their website:

www.wchn.sa.gov.au/our-network/camhs

2. You can seek an ASD assessment through the Women's and Children's Hospital (WCH) Child Development Unit (CDU). This will be a multi-disciplinary assessment:

If you are considering this route, I recommend you take a look at the website (wch.sa.gov.au, then search "Child Development Unit").

If you take this route, you will need a referral from one of the following people:

Medical professional: This could be a GP, paediatrician, medical officer, or specialist. (For a teenager with what I sometimes like to call Aspergers, it would most likely be their GP).

Allied health professional: e.g., a speech pathologist, occupational therapist or psychologist. (For a teenager with Aspergers, it would most likely be their psychologist).

Care/Education: This could be the leadership team at your child's school in consultation with support services, or special educators. (However, I suspect that this process is not likely to occur for many teenagers with Aspergers).

- i. Book an appointment for your teenager with their GP.

At the appointment, describe your teenager's symptoms in as much detail as possible. Stress the severity of your teenager's symptoms. Tell the GP that you

want to have them assessed for ASD, that you feel they need to see a psychiatrist, and ask that they refer your teenager to the Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit, for an ASD assessment.

- ii. Your GP will first undertake investigations to rule out other possible underlying causes for your teenager's 'certain issues', and perform a screening test or informal assessment of your teenager, for ASD. Some GPs will be better than others in this regard, as outlined in paragraph 1.ii above.
- iii. Further, there is a good chance that your teenager's GP will refer them to a psychologist at Headspace, as outlined in paragraph 1.iii above. If this is the case, return to your teenager's GP, as outlined in paragraph 1.iii above, and tell them that you want your teenager referred to WCH CDU, as per your initial request.
- iv. Your GP still might not refer your teenager to WCH CDU, but might instead refer them to CAMHS, as outlined in paragraph 1.iv to 1.vii above. The psychiatrist at CAMHS might do an ASD assessment, or CAMHS might refer your teenager to WCH CDU.

Once you have found an appropriate person (e.g., your teenager's GP, or a psychologist or psychiatrist at CAMHS) to refer your teenager to the Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit, the referring person will complete the appropriate referral form based on what they have observed in your teenager, and in consultation with you, the parents, and they will submit the referral form.

Once the referral form has been submitted and received, the waiting time for an Autism Diagnostic Assessment appointment through the Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit is:

14 - 18 months.

Yes, you read correctly. It is 14 – 18 months.

This is, of course, absolutely unacceptable. However, it is not the fault of the Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit, but due to the extremely high demand, and not enough resources to meet the demand.

The Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit can only treat children until they are 18, but at least if they have been able to provide your teenager with a diagnosis of ASD, you can obtain NDIS funding for them. NDIS funding should enable you to pay for your teenager to have regular, ongoing sessions with a private psychologist who actually has expertise in ASD, and in particular, what I sometimes like to call Aspergers.

The Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit has three centres, depending on where you live:

1. Metropolitan:

Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit
72 King William Road, North Adelaide SA 5006 - **Ph: 8161 7287**

This centre takes children up to 18 years old.

2. North:

Lyell McEwin Hospital, Gordon McKay Child Development Unit
Haydown Road, Elizabeth Vale SA 5112 - **Ph: 7485 4109**

However, since this centre only takes children up to 8 years old, your teenager with ASD/Aspergers would have to go to the Women's and Children's Hospital, Child Development Unit.

3. **South:**

Flinders Medical Centre, Children's Assessment Team
Flinders Drive, Bedford Park SA - **Ph: 8204 4433**

This centre takes children up to 16 years old. For children over 16, it will be decided on a case by case basis, whether this centre can take them.

In the public health system, a diagnostic assessment for ASD will only be undertaken IF doctors cannot find any other cause for your teenager's symptoms. This means that they will explore every other possible option first, which will likely involve your teenager seeing a variety of different mental health professionals at a variety of different locations. Your teenager will be asked a lot of the same questions by each different mental health professional, and the whole process will probably take at least two years.

This process is exactly the sort of thing that a teenager with ASD/Aspergers **cannot cope with**, due to their ASD/Aspergers. It will very likely drive your teenager to the point of severe psychological distress, as outlined on the first page of this section. That will then enable them to have a chance of being assessed for ASD through the public health system. You simply have to pray that they don't die by suicide first.

If you seek an ASD assessment for your teenager through Autism SA, or a private clinic or clinician, they too will seek to rule out other possible causes of your teenager's symptoms. However, your teenager will not have to go through a long and involved process before getting to the stage of being assessed for ASD. Instead, you can simply book an ASD assessment appointment with Autism SA, or a private clinic or clinician, yourself. The assessment process will most likely take place at one location, over only one or two appointments within a short space of time, and should only involve one or two different health professionals.