

Early Overload Signs in Autistic Children

A practical checklist for noticing overload sooner

Autistic nervous systems often show signs of overload before a meltdown or shutdown occurs. This checklist is designed to help you notice early changes, so support can be offered sooner and with less pressure. There are no “right” or “wrong” signs — every child is different.

BODY SIGNS

- Increased movement (pacing, fidgeting, rocking)
- Sudden stillness or freezing
- Changes in muscle tone (tense or floppy)
- Covering ears or eyes
- Changes in breathing
- Fatigue or appearing “shut down”

BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS

- Reduced tolerance for demands
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Withdrawal or avoidance
- Increased rigidity or perfectionism
- Difficulty transitioning between activities
- Seeming “fine” and then collapsing later

EMOTIONAL / INTERNAL SIGNS

- Heightened anxiety or tearfulness
- Emotional numbness
- Increased need for control
- Sudden overwhelm that feels “out of proportion”
- Difficulty explaining what feels wrong

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Overload is not misbehaviour
Signs are often subtle at first
Overload can be cumulative

Support is most helpful before a child reaches their limit