# Concerns rise over autism diagnosis rates and implications in Ireland



A growing discussion around autism diagnosis rates in Ireland has emerged, focusing on concerns about potential overdiagnosis and its wider implications. Recent research indicating that one in 20 schoolchildren in the country are now classified as autistic—representing a threefold increase over the past decade—has sparked debate among medical professionals, parents, and policymakers.

Renowned Irish consultant neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan has been at the forefront of calling attention to this development. In her recent book, The Age of Diagnosis, she critiques the broadening of diagnostic criteria for autism, particularly at the milder end of the spectrum. Speaking to RTÉ radio’s Brendan O’Connor, Dr O'Sullivan expressed that “it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if you label [someone] autistic. The diagnosis may or may not be right, but it’s not helping.” She further highlighted that while diagnoses of autism have surged, an even larger number of young adults are experiencing depression, leading her to conclude, “Diagnosing may be well-intentioned, but it isn’t working.”

Her views have contributed to this issue gaining prominence on television and radio current affairs programmes such as Prime Time, signalling a shift from previous consensus where sharply rising autism diagnosis rates were broadly celebrated without critical scrutiny. Historically, the increase had been framed solely as positive progress in “breaking the stigma” and “raising awareness,” with little space for questioning the reasons behind the rise or its consequences.

This earlier narrative also encouraged public sharing of adult autism diagnoses, with many celebrities describing feelings of relief and comfort upon learning their status. However, concerns have been raised that this focus on mild or adult diagnoses risks overshadowing the experiences of individuals more profoundly affected by autism. Families of severely affected children often find themselves dealing with a disorder that is increasingly presented in ways that may seem to understate the challenges faced by those who will never acquire full speech, social skills, or independent living capabilities. One parent perspective highlighted the contrast between public attention on high-functioning individuals, such as actor Anthony Hopkins, and the realities for children with more significant impairments.

Parents advocating caution about overdiagnosis have sometimes faced criticism, accused of speaking for autistic people or questioning the validity of widespread diagnosis trends without sufficient evidence. This dynamic reflects a sensitive and complex public conversation about how best to understand autism’s diverse manifestations and the impact of diagnostic labels on identity, self-esteem, and social inclusion.

Political discourse has also reflected this tension. Minister for Mental Health Mary Butler issued an apology after referring to increases in autism and ADHD referrals—and the consequent pressure on waiting lists—as a “trend.” Her comment drew criticism from some politicians, including TD Ruth Coppinger, who demanded an apology or resignation, citing parental anger. Yet examination of the wider dialogue suggests many parents seek nuanced understanding rather than simple labels, recognising that appropriate diagnosis and support are crucial without wanting children categorised unnecessarily. They express interest in whether elements of social contagion influence diagnosis rates and favour inclusive education where possible rather than automatic placement in special units.

The Irish Mirror is reporting that figures like Dr O'Sullivan play a vital role in challenging the medical community to reassess the current diagnostic approach. Her stance—asserting that medicine may, in this instance, have “gone too far”—marks a significant contribution to ongoing efforts to align diagnostic practices with meaningful outcomes for individuals and society alike.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2025/03/11/one-in-20-irish-schoolchildren-diagnosed-with-autism-a-threefold-rise/> - Corroborates the claim about recent research showing one in 20 Irish schoolchildren being diagnosed with autism, representing a threefold increase over the past decade.
* <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/your-family/2024/11/24/autism-why-are-so-many-children-being-diagnosed-these-days/> - Supports the discussion on rising autism diagnosis rates in Ireland, including the 2023 report of 5% prevalence in schoolchildren and debates around diagnostic criteria expansion.
* <https://autismni.org/what-is-autism/statistics> - Provides Northern Ireland-specific data (1 in 20 children diagnosed with autism) referenced in discussions about broader regional trends affecting Irish discourse.
* <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-prevalence-autism-including-aspergers-syndrome-school-age-children-northern-ireland-annual-report-2023> - Details the 2022/23 Northern Ireland autism prevalence report (5.0% in school-aged children), contributing to cross-border comparisons in the article.
* <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/personalpq/pq/2023-pq-responses/september%202023/pq-37378-23-john-lahart.pdf> - Acknowledges challenges in autism prevalence estimation in Ireland, relevant to debates about diagnostic accuracy and methodology.