

Speech and Language Pathologists: What to Expect



1. What qualifications does one need to have to be designated as a speech and language pathologist (SLP) in Ontario?

SLPs in Ontario must hold a Master's degree in Speech Language Pathology from an accredited university and be registered with the College of Audiologists and Speech-Language Pathologists (CASLPO). To register with CASLPO, SLPs must have completed over 900 hours of course work and 300 hours of supervised clinical practicum with both children and adults representing a wide variety of communication disorders.



2. What is the role of an SLP in supporting people with autism?

The main focus of an SLP working with someone on the autism spectrum should be to ensure that they have a functional communication system that allows them to be independent in their ability to make their wants and needs known.

An SLP will assess the person's speech, language, and communication skills, and provide services to effect significant changes within the following areas:

- Speech: articulation and intelligibility of speech
- Language skills: the understanding and use of language
- Communication skills: requesting skills, commenting, conversational skills, etc.
- The use of language for social purposes
- Reading skills
- Written language skills
- Vocal quality
- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), e.g. sign language, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and voice-output/speech generating devices (SGDs) such as the use of a tablet with a communications app

The SLP will follow an evidence-based practice process to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses, identify areas/specific skills which require intervention and the appropriate format of intervention, develop a goal plan based on assessment and conversations with parents/caregivers and the patient (if possible), and provide treatment.

3. Why might an autistic person need to see an SLP?

One of the most common challenges that autistic people experience is difficulty with communication, including delayed or absent development of first words, delayed or absent use of gestures to communicate, difficulty understanding words and concepts, difficulty using language for written purposes, difficulty with social skills, and poor articulation of spoken words. Some autistic people also struggle with chewing or swallowing.

SLPs have unique training in physiology, neurology, child development, speech sound development, language acquisition and use, social skill development, and the social use of language. Many also have training in the mechanisms required for safe eating/drinking. SLPs can help autistic people build these skills to improve their overall communication and activities of daily living (e.g. eating).

4. Many autistic people experience sensory challenges; how can an SLP mitigate this during an appointment?

Knowing which specific sensory challenges exist in advance is helpful. For example, if noise is a concern, any music playing in the office would be turned down or off during the visit. Lighting can also be dimmed. If perfumes or other scents are a concern, they would be eliminated as much as possible during the visit. If the patient has a comfort object/toy, they are sometimes encouraged to bring it with them.

SLPs are often flexible in where the appointments take place and may be able to cater to what is most comfortable for the client, e.g. in the SLP's office, in the client's home, via virtual telepractice platforms, or in community settings such as school or daycare.

5. What questions should I ask an SLP when I contact them to provide services?

When connecting with an SLP, you can keep these questions in mind:

- Are they experienced with working with autistic people?
 - Do they have experience providing services to both high-needs, non-vocal autistic people and low-needs, highly verbal autistic people?
- What is the breakdown of the fees (assessments, sessions, reports, mileage, etc.)?
- How long are the appointments, and can they be adjusted to accommodate individual needs?
- Will the caregiver be seen as a partner in goal setting and will there be objective SMART¹ goals developed to address the client's individual needs?
- Is the family considered part of the 'treatment' team since interprofessional practice

¹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time bound

(clinicians + parent(s) + other professionals) is often critical for complex neurological differences?

6. Can an SLP work with other professionals in supporting autistic people, such as behavioural clinicians, occupational therapists, or physicians?

The SLP can be a valuable team member in supporting people with autism. The SLP brings to any team the knowledge of typical speech and language development and the ability to assist the OT and behaviour clinician with determining appropriate speech, language, and communication goals for programming purposes.

7. What is the typical fee for an SLP? Is there funding available to families for SLP services?

There is not a 'typical' fee for private SLP services in Ontario. The Ontario Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (OSLA) publishes a fee schedule yearly to assist SLPs in determining appropriate fees. There are also many factors included in determining private practice fees such as overheads, experience/levels of competency in specific areas, multiple degrees, etc. There may also be additional charges for service such as charting time, cancellations, travel time, mileage (km), as well as other services such as medical-legal reports, court attendance, attending meetings, etc. which may/may not be allowable under some specific funding avenues.

There are also some programs and charities that will fund private SLP services: many families have extended health benefits that will cover all/part of SLP services private SLP services can also be claimed under Medical Expenses on your income tax.

The Ontario Autism Program (OAP) covers varying degrees of SLP services depending on what type of OAP funding the child has received. You can learn more at: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-autism-program>.

About Tracie Lindblad, Reg. CASLPO, M.Sc., M.Ed., BCBA

Tracie is a dually credentialed Speech-Language Pathologist and Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA) with over 30 years' experience working within school settings and private practice. She has extensive experience working with children, youth, and adults with developmental disabilities, severe problem behaviour, ASD, complex communication needs, and dual diagnosis. Tracie is currently Director of Clinical Services at First Bridge Centre, and provides ongoing training, management and clinical oversight.

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