

# CHINS: SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Capstone Project for Georgia 2Gen Academy



Georgia's Children in Need of Services (CHINS) program plays a critical role in supporting youth who are at risk of deeper court involvement. For youth with autism, however, system variability, limited autism-specific guidance, and fragmented service pathways can result in responses that are misaligned with their developmental and behavioral needs.

We examined how the CHINS system is structured in Georgia, what is known about youth with autism in the state, and the challenges CHINS programs face when serving this population. We highlight practical considerations that CHINS programs can implement using existing resources and outline longer-term, system-level recommendations to improve outcomes for youth with autism involved in CHINS.

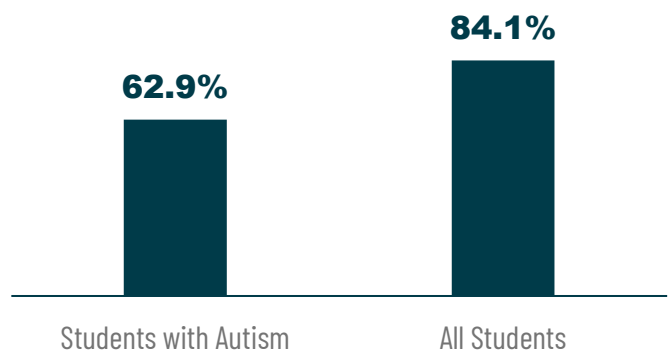
**What is CHINS?** Georgia's Children in Need of Services (CHINS) program (O.C.G.A. § 15-11-2) is a civil, court-based intervention designed to support youth whose behaviors place them at risk of deeper involvement in the juvenile justice system. The goal is to stabilize youth and families through supervision, services, and community-based supports while preventing escalation into more formal court involvement. Cases are typically initiated by a parent, guardian, school, or other community stakeholder and are reviewed by the court to determine eligibility. Juvenile courts often collaborate with community service providers, schools, behavioral health agencies, and family support organizations to deliver interventions such as counseling, family services, educational supports, and case management.

## Georgia Youth with Autism

Appropriate, timely services can significantly improve educational outcomes and overall well-being for youth with autism, while unmet needs can contribute to challenges across school, family, and community settings. An estimated **4.1% of Georgia's children ages 3-17 have an autism** diagnosis reported by a parent or caregiver, and national research suggests that **about one in four adolescents with autism may remain undiagnosed.**

Youth with autism may experience different educational outcomes, with 62.9% of Georgia's students receiving special education services for autism graduating with a high school diploma in 2022, compared to 84.1% of students overall. National research further shows that **by age 21, approximately 20% of youth with autism had been stopped and questioned by police, and nearly 5% had been arrested,** often due to behavioral misunderstandings rather than criminal intent.

2022 Georgia High School Diploma Rates



**Youth with autism are at heightened risk of unmet support needs and system involvement, underscoring why children with autism served by CHINS warrant focused, autism-informed attention.**

## Challenges faced by CHINS

CHINS programs play an important role in supporting youth with behavioral and family related challenges, but they face significant difficulties when serving youth with autism, including fragmented service systems, funding barriers, limited access to specialized care, lack of resources in rural areas, and a mismatch between traditional behavioral models and autism specific needs.

When CHINS started in 2014, it was decided that each court could decide for themselves what CHINS should look like so there is no uniform mandate for communities to make sure that each county has CHINS or follows guidance. Many professionals within CHINS systems do not have adequate training in autism specific strategies. This limits their ability to properly access needs, de-escalate situations, and provide appropriate interventions. There are often long waiting times for autism diagnoses, therapy, and psychiatric care. For CHINS-involved youth who may already be in crisis, these delays can make it difficult to stabilize quickly.

## Considerations for CHINS

Children diagnosed with autism can display behaviors that are misread as defiance or noncompliant. Sensory, emotional, and cognitive overload may be mistaken for intentional misconduct. Potential approaches for the Court's consideration:

- **Communication Access:** Courts are encouraged to provide visual aids, plain language explanations, and extra time for processing questions.
- **Physical Accommodations:** Measures include reducing sensory triggers (like loud noises or bright lights) and allowing the use of fidget tools or comfort items during hearings.
- **Early Identification:** Consider mandatory training for staff and law enforcement to recognize signs of autism early to prevent a punitive response to disability-related behaviors.
- **Individualized Services:** The court can order specialized services, including behavioral support, medical treatment, and mental health counseling to meet the specific needs of a child with autism.

## Statewide Recommendations

1. Develop a toolbox that counties can utilize with relevant resources including a template for an intake sheet, orientation module, landscape analysis and strategic plan to support program design.
2. Increase or provide state funding for CHINS to complement federal grants.
3. Consider contracting and collaborating with community agencies that can support implementation of the program. Each agency could evaluate how they could effectively participate in the program.
4. Create a formal "Child Profile Tool" designed to allow parents to submit their child's specific triggers and communication needs as part of the official court record.
5. Ensure the family is at the center of the process by building trusting relationships and asking screening questions to understand the families' needs specific to children with Autism.
6. Create referral pathways by identifying where children who need CHINS services may already be.
7. Consider creating a centralized and optional professional development at the state level for counties to use.