



What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurological difference that affects how people communicate and interact with others.

Most autistic people see, hear and experience the world differently from neurotypical people, but like neurotypical people, every autistic person is unique and complex.

Historically, there was a common misconception that the autistic spectrum is a straight line between low and high functioning, but as understanding has increased, it is clear that everyone is completely different with different strengths and weaknesses. For example, one autistic person may be highly creative but struggle to organise themselves- another may excel at maths but find it hard to join in two-way conversations.

Autistic people will typically have challenges in some of the following areas:

1) Social interaction

They may:

- **Find it difficult to initiate or maintain friendships**
- **Prefer daily routine and strictly follow rules**
- **Demonstrate repetitive behaviours**
- **Speak in a way that is over direct**
- **Prefer to interact with objects or animals to people**
- **Have difficulties reading facial expressions or body language**
- **Find it hard to understand or express their feelings**
- **Like to control, have difficulty turn taking**

2)Communication

They may:

- **Need more time to process information**
- **Sometimes find it hard to make eye contact**
- **Have delayed language or be non-verbal or selectively mute**
- **Appear to be articulate but actually lack understanding**
- **Use repetitive language or mimic phrases or tones/accents they hear elsewhere (this is called Echolalia)**
- **Take things literally/ don't understand sarcasm or jokes**
- **Find it hard to stay focussed or engage in conversations that do not spark their interest.**
- **Will always give you their honest opinion- if they say you look nice then you do!**



3)Sensory Processing Differences

Autistic children experience the world differently to neurotypical people and this can be across all of their senses. This can provide a challenge for many autistic children.

They may find these things hard:

- **Someone touching them get their attention**

- Different soaps, wash powders, cleaning products, cooking smells, a teacher's perfume etc.
- Fire alarm tests
- New clothes/ certain textures of fabric
- Hand dryers and vacuum cleaners, to name a few.

4) Processing Information

Autistic people often have a good eye for detail, although this may be at the expense of looking at the bigger picture. They often benefit from building up sequences (eg might be steps to getting dressed or undressed or cleaning their teeth). They often benefit from multi step instructions being broken down into smaller steps. Educational Psychologists would say that these are linked to differences in Executive Function.

5) Special Interests

Autistic children can have an interest in one subject to the exclusion of everything else. Many autistic people find their special interest hugely enjoyable and rewarding. Sometimes the interest may be in sorting items or lining them up. If they tell you about their special interest, you should be proud as they feel safe with you. It can be a power for good- for example, Greta Thunberg's special interest is in protecting the environment.



Autistic Masking

It can be difficult to obtain a diagnosis of autism when a child appears sociable, but if you know them well enough, you can see how much energy they are putting into performing to appear “normal”. This is called ‘masking’. It can be very stressful to children who are masking as they are constantly suppressing their natural instincts or trying to do behaviours that are not instinctive to them.

