

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition caused by differences in the brain, often referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), historically autism spectrum condition (ASC) and falling under the neurodivergent (ND) umbrella. Autistic individuals see and experience the world differently from neurotypical (NT) peers, which creates both strengths and challenges through life.

This factsheet is designed to provide information about autism, but it is important that you consider the information included within this factsheet in the context of the needs of your own child; every situation is unique, and every autistic individual has their own strengths and challenges to overcome with autism often referred to as a 'spectrum' of needs.

“If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism”
Dr Stephen Shore

Facts about autism

- Autistic individuals are born autistic
- Autism tends to run in families – autistic parents are more likely to have autistic children, and parents who have one autistic child have a greater chance of having a second child who is autistic
- It is estimated that more than 1 in 100 individuals are autistic¹
- Autism is 3 times more likely to be diagnosed in boys than girls.² Please see our **Autistic women and girls** factsheet for more information
- In England, fewer than 22% of autistic adults are in paid employment³

Diagnosis

A diagnosis of autism can happen at any stage in someone's life. An assessment is carried out by a team of professionals, who will look at a person's development and observe their behaviour to agree whether a diagnosis of autism is appropriate. The assessment and subsequent report will highlight the specific needs an individual might have, thus enabling them to access the appropriate support. In particular, for children and young adults in education, it can provide access to further support within their educational setting, with studies also showing overwhelming support for early intervention.

Diagnostic criteria

Diagnosis criteria for autism includes differences in the use or understanding of social communication and social interaction as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities. A diagnosis will happen where there is enough evidence of differences in these areas. While some of these differences can make life more challenging for an autistic person, many of these differences can also present as strengths. For example, strengths in problem solving, attention to detail, creativity and visual perception, open and honest communication.

What are some of the common traits associated with autism?

- Delayed milestones in childhood such as in cognition, speech and communication
- Impacts on motor skills, such as co-ordination (catching), mark-making (writing, drawing), muscle tone (balance)
- Masking – hiding or disguising autistic traits in an attempt to 'fit in' (this is understood to be particularly common in autistic females)
- Reduced or inconsistent use of eye contact. Some autistic people may mask and force eye contact.
- Specific interests that may be very passionate. May talk passionately about certain topics and not engage in small talk.

- Find security in routines which offer comfort. Behaviours may appear to be ‘repetitive’ in engaging in such routines.
- Literal ‘black and white’ thinking
- Differences in sensitivity to certain senses – sight, smell, taste, or touch. View our factsheet on **Understanding your child’s sensory needs** for more information.
- Difficulties with understanding social cues or reading others, including general interaction, reciprocal conversation, listening skills, turn-taking and sharing.
- Stimming – repetitive body movements or noises that help a person to regulate their sensory experiences.
- Difficulty regulating, managing or understanding their own emotions.
- May show a preference for own company or independent play.



Autistic strengths

Each person has their own individual strengths. Some strengths that may be elevated by being autistic include:

- Attention to detail, often noticing things that allistic (those who are not autistic) people may not pick up on
- Extensive knowledge in a particular area due to passionate interests
- Practical and logical thinking
- Can be extremely empathetic
- Honest
- Creativity
- Enhanced visual and auditory perception

Co-occurring conditions

There are several conditions that may occur alongside autism. These include epilepsy, anxiety, and learning disabilities. For more information see our **Co-occurring conditions** factsheet.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a term to describe individuals whose neurotypes (brain types) are a different variation from the rest of the population. Autism, ADHD/ADD and specific learning difficulties are all examples of neurodivergence.

This means that individuals perceive and navigate the world differently, which may pose a challenge in a world centred towards the predominant neurotype. However, with the right understanding and correct levels of support, all autistic individuals can flourish in the right environment.

Individual needs

No autistic person is the same; they are all individual which means that certain milestones or traits might be vastly different in one person compared with another. For example, you may meet one non-speaking child with a fixation on trains and another vocal child with severe behavioural challenges in a social setting; both children would present very different characteristics of autism – but they may both be classified as on the spectrum of autistic needs.

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It is important to recognise your child's strengths and interests to support them to access a life full of choice, independence and opportunity. In many cases, our strengths and interests form our strategies in managing challenges and becoming resilient; this is no different for autistic children and adults. They can also form future vocations, hobbies and shared interests.

Representation matters, whether that be in the media, business or our communities. As more people share their autistic experiences, the greater the understanding will be. High profile autistic individuals include Sir Anthony Hopkins (actor), Greta Thunberg (activist), Stephen Wiltshire (artist), Armani Williams (racing driver), Bill Gates (technology entrepreneur).

In our **Navigating support** factsheet you can find guidance on the types of support available and how to get the most from them.

References

1. The NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, Brugha, T. et al (2012). Estimating the prevalence of autism spectrum conditions in adults: extending the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey. Leeds: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care
2. Loomes R, Hull L & Mandy WPL (2017). What Is the Male-to-Female Ratio in Autism Spectrum Disorder? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*; 56(6): 466-474.
3. Office for National Statistics, Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2020, (2021). Accessed online.