



Autism: Common Terms

Some of the more common terms around autism – please let us know if we have missed anything you'd like to see on here!

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC): Technology can be particularly helpful for autistic people who have difficulties with their social communication and interaction. AAC includes a wide range of strategies and equipment.

Asperger's Syndrome: Asperger's syndrome is no longer used as a separate diagnosis. It may still be used as a descriptive term, and there will be many people who have this diagnosis. It is however considered to have negative connotations and so is being phased out of common use.

Assessment and diagnosis: if you have concerns that your child/young person may be autistic, ask your GP or school SENCO to refer them for an assessment. Depending on your local authority, they will be assessed jointly by a team including a paediatrician, speech and language therapist, educational psychologist and/or a child psychiatrist. There are several diagnostic tools that may be used depending on the preference of your local team. This can be a long process and support is available from our team pre- during and post-assessment.

Autism with a Demand-Avoidant (or PDA) Profile: this has been recently accepted as a distinct profile belonging to the autism spectrum. Children and young people with this profile can be extremely sensitive to sensory input, and to any perceived demand. A determined, controlling approach will only serve to increase anxiety and their need to avoid the demand, and a flexible and creative approach is best when living and working with them.

See our resources and training around autism with DAP / PDA.

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Autistic Savant

is the term used for an autistic person who has a special talent, for example, drawing, maths or playing an instrument. One possible reason could be the single-minded concentration an autistic child can give to one subject to the exclusion of all others, but it appears to be more of an ability due to a difference in processing in the brain. Probably the most well-known example of a savant is the character played by Dustin Hoffman in the film 'Rainman'. Only about 10% of autistic individuals will have this special ability.

Co-morbidities are simply other conditions that are present alongside autism in the individual. Common co-morbidities are dyspraxia, epilepsy, sensory processing difficulties and other neurodevelopmental conditions though these are not always present and need to be properly assessed if it is suspected they are affecting the child or young person.

DSM-5 – DSM is the diagnostic statistical manual, produced in America and used to classify and diagnose mental health disorders. The most recent revision is the DSM-5 (the 5th version). It is used widely in the UK.

Dyad – autism is now considered to have two areas of difficulty, for diagnostic purposes (a 'dyad of impairments'):

Social communication and interaction difficulties and
Rigid repetitive behaviours

Both areas must be present for a diagnosis of ASD, though they will be at varying levels for individuals affected by the condition.

Echolalia:

Some children may directly echo or copy another person's words or phrases (including from TV, videos and other sources) or sometimes noises that they hear. Echolalia is sometimes used when a child is aware that they are expected to say something, but they don't have the word-finding skills to express themselves, and so they 'borrow' words. This may lead adults to have a false impression of a child's language ability.

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Echolalia often masks comprehension problems. As children develop in their language skills echolalia will usually reduce. It may be also used in a non-communicative way to self-soothe, when a child repeats a word, phrase or sound simply because they like the way it feels to say it.

EHC Plan (EHCP or educational health care plan). An EHC plan is a legal document that describes a child or young person's additional educational, health and social care needs. It explains the extra help that will be given to meet those needs and how that help will support the child or young person to achieve what they want to in their life. You can request an assessment for an EHCP through school or via your Local Offer website; your independent SEND team (SENDIASS) will help with the application as it can be a lengthy process.

Expressive Language is the language we use to communicate to others. This is not always just the use of speech but will also include general communication skills. Often there is a difference in the levels of receptive and expressive language in children with social and communication difficulties.

High-Functioning / Low Functioning Autism. These terms have been popular to distinguish the different ways autism can impact on individuals but are no longer advised as they are considered by many to be offensive.

Hyperlexia – this is a condition that includes the ability to read at a very early stage, but without understanding the words. Children with hyperlexia usually also have significant social communication difficulties and are often fascinated with words and numbers; they are not always on the autistic spectrum but there is a significant overlap.

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Intolerance of Uncertainty

is a name given to the difficulties autistic people have in dealing with change. Research has shown that very gradual and supported exposure to change together with specific coaching can help to reduce this anxiety-based difficulty and widen the experience of the individual.

Literal Interpretation – autistic people will often take what is spoken to them literally. For example, they may look at their fingers in surprise if they enjoy gardening and are called green fingered. This is a result of their thinking patterns and can cause distress and confusion. Similarly, sarcasm can leave autistic individuals confused and upset.

Meltdown – a state of high arousal, anxiety or distress typically caused by sensory overload, especially in autistic individuals, and sometimes misunderstood as a tantrum.

Neurodiverse – refers to a different way of thinking and learning than that which is considered typical. Some individuals prefer to use this term to describe themselves over ‘autistic’ or ‘ADHD’.

Neuro-typical (NT) is a phrase originally used by many in the autistic community to refer to non-autistic people (or those without a neurodevelopmental condition); it is now widely used by the scientific community and those who consider themselves neurodiverse.

PECS refers to the ‘picture exchange communication system’ and it is a method of encouraging two-way communication using picture cards. Children who struggle with verbal communication learn from simply exchanging a picture symbol for something they want to learn to initiate communication and answer questions. This uses the preference many autistic people have in processing visual information over aural information.

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Receptive Language Capacity is our ability to understand the words that we hear. Autistic children often have difficulty understanding what is being said to them, especially if the language used is too difficult or hard to follow, so they are said to have a deficit in receptive language.

RRBs – part of the criteria for diagnosis of autism, these are ‘rigid repetitive behaviours’ also described as a need for sameness and difficulties with change. They also cover stimming behaviours described below.

SalT speech and language therapist.

Selective Mutism. A person who is selectively mute find it extremely difficult to talk comfortably in every situation. It’s a fear of talking to certain people or in particular situations (usually outside of the home) and is often described as a phobia of talking to people outside of a small, trusted group (usually parents, close family or friends).

SENDIASS or IASS Team. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services offer information, advice and support for parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This service is also offered directly to young people. The service is free, impartial, and confidential and available in every local authority.

Sensory Integration (SI): this is the way the brain processes sensory stimulation or sensation from the body and translates it into specific, planned and coordinated motor activity.

Sensory Processing Difficulties (SPD) is the term used to describe differences in processing sensory information; SPD is very common in autistic individuals. People can be under-responsive or over-responsive to any or all of the eight sensory systems and this can have a major impact on their ability to engage with learning and everyday life experiences. See our separate resources and training on SPD.

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A Special Interest – once known as ‘obsession’ is common in the autistic community and can be a rich source of satisfaction and expertise in some cases and is the result of the autistic ability to stay on one subject or activity for a protracted time. Some people stay with their special interest for years, others may change between interests more frequently.

Stimming (also known as ‘stims’ or ‘stereotypies’) is the term for the repetition of certain movements, words or vocalisations. They are usually used by autistic people to calm and sooth themselves, or just for enjoyment. Hand flapping, spinning and rocking are common examples, and they are often harmless, but some ‘stims’ or such as headbanging or excessive scratching may need to be replaced with less damaging activities. They are considered to be a response to a need to moderate sensory input – either to increase it or to block it, depending on the needs of the individual.

Strengths: as with all people strengths and weaknesses are very individual and no two autistic people are the same! However, friends and colleagues often appreciate their ability to learn interesting facts about a subject, their memory, having an eye for detail, their accuracy in many areas and their ability to thrive in a well-organised and structured environment.

Theory of Mind: This is the ability to understand or the awareness that your own beliefs, thoughts, and intentions are different and separate from those of others. Commonly theory of mind in autistic people develops later than in neuro-typical people and can result in their being vulnerable to deception and teasing or bullying.

Many of the entries to this handout have individual resource sheets; please check for details on our website, and for our resources specifically written for children and young people.

For more information, advice and guidance contact us on the numbers below.

Liverpool / Halton / Knowsley / Sefton / Wirral: **0151 486 1788**

St Helens: **01744 582172**

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