

Autism and Communication

Autism affects the way a person understands and interacts with the world.

Autistic people can be called neurodivergent. This is because they have different strengths and weaknesses to non-autistic people, who can also be called allistic or neurotypical.

Autistic people may have trouble communicating effectively, especially with neurotypical people.

It can be hard for autistic and non-autistic people to understand each other's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and differences, and this can happen no matter what form of communication people use.

Communication differences

The table below shows how autistic and non-autistic people communicate differently.

Stress, in particular, is a common issue for autistic people. Sometimes when autistic people are stressed or upset, they can have trouble finding the right words to use. They can also have trouble with the motor skills they use to speak.

Reducing stress in these contexts can help support clear and effective communication.

Social communication differences

Autistic people	Non-autistic people
May have difficulty interpreting non-literal communication, such as picking up on social cues	Often communicate with social norms in mind, rather than communicating things literally
May be affected by sensory distractions	Often fail to recognise and understand the impact of sensory distractions
May need longer to process spoken language they hear	Often uncomfortable with silence and may speak to fill silence
May struggle to speak when stressed or distressed	Often speak more loudly when stressed or distressed
May use body movements, both voluntary and involuntary, as a form of communication	May use facial expression, intonation, and body posture, both voluntary and involuntary, as a form of communication.

Communication Supports

The table below shows some of the supports that autistic and non-autistic people may need to help them communicate.

Social communication support needs

Autistic people	Non-autistic people
May prefer literal communication – say what you mean and mean what you say	May need support to recognise and understand autistic people's communication needs
May struggle with or prefer not to make eye contact	Often need eye contact to know they are being listened to
May need an alternative communication system (AAC)	May need to understand how to communicate with people using AAC
May need time to process communication before responding	May need support to understand that someone who takes time to respond is not being rude or 'does not have the answer'

Autistic children and young people who do not use speech to communicate can use AAC. Contrary to popular belief, using AAC actually helps autistic children to develop speech, if they are going to speak.

Visual supports can help with social communication.

For example, playgrounds may include a visual communication board that allows children to interact with others who do not use the same language or type of communication.

Involuntary body movements

People with autism may have involuntary body movements, sometimes called tics or stims.

These movements may include rocking, flapping, finger movements, leg bouncing and feet movements.

When autistic people communicate with other autistic people, these tics and stims can form part of the communication. They can be a form of self-regulation and can be an indication of stress or excitement. They may also signal mood or engagement with the group.

A non-autistic person may not notice or recognise the subtle differences between two or more tics or stims in the same person. They may think that the same body movement in two different autistic people conveys the same meaning, when it is unlikely to do so.

Other differences

Non-autistic people's communication skills are generally balanced, so they have similar levels of skill at expressing themselves and understanding others.

This might not be the case for an autistic person.

For example, an autistic person who can only understand single words at a time may be able to use whole phrases or sentences.

They may communicate using speech alone or a range of other techniques such as sign, texting or using a text/icon to speech device.

On the other hand, an autistic person may understand complex spoken instructions but only be able to respond with one or two spoken words or signs or by pointing to one single icon on their AAC system/device.

How a speech pathologist can help

A speech pathologist can:

- help work out what an autistic person might need to support their communication.
- develop a plan to help the person in family, work, and community contexts.
- help make the environments in which autistic people live, learn, and work accessible.

Find out more

Useful links to Australian neurodiversity affirming resources and supports:

<https://positivepartnerships.com.au>

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism>

<https://reframingautism.org.au/>

<https://www.amaze.org.au/autismconnect/>