

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.

One in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK.

What autism isn't!

An illness or disease

Bad behaviour / willful defiance

Bad parenting

Affects only children

Facts and Myths

Evidence suggests that autism may be genetic. Scientists have been attempting to identify which genes might be implicated in autism for some years. Autism is likely to have multiple genes responsible rather than a single gene.

There is no link between autism and vaccines. Much research has been devoted to this issue over the years and the results have comprehensively shown there is no link.

Autism Acceptance and Awareness

Wales Primary School



I'm Arthur and I'm Autistic,
Autism is great.
It can make people very clever.
We don't think like other
people. Sometimes the brain is
thinking a lot about interesting
things like Mario.
I love maths and science and
can work out all square numbers
and I can tell you about deep
space objects, black holes and
nuclear fusion.
We feel happy, sometimes sad
and sometimes mad. We just
want friends, but sometimes
struggle to know how to make
them.

I'm fine having autism it makes
me unique and clever.

(Arthur, Y3, Wales Primary
School)

"Autism awareness means nothing
without Autism acceptance."

(Wales Primary School parent)

Social communication and social interaction challenges

Social communication

Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand sarcasm or tone of voice. Other challenges include:

- taking things literally and not understanding abstract concepts
- needing extra time to process information or answer questions
- repeating what others say to them (this is called echolalia)

Social interaction

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard to navigate the social world. Autistic people may:

- appear to be insensitive
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate
- find it hard to form friendships.

Repetitive and restrictive behaviour

With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people. This is why they often prefer to have routines so that they know what is going to happen. They may want to travel the same way to and from school or work, wear the same clothes or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Autistic people may also repeat movements such as hand flapping, rocking or the repetitive use of an object such as twirling a pen or opening and closing a door. Autistic people often engage in these behaviours to help calm themselves when they are stressed or anxious, but many autistic people do it because they find it enjoyable.

"When you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism, everyone is an individual."

(Wales Primary School parent)



"Autistic children are all individuals with their own unique traits, please don't treat them as a collective disorder."

(Wales Primary School parent)

Highly focused interests or hobbies

Many autistic people have intense and highly focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge. A stereotypical example is trains but that is one of many. Greta Thunberg's intense interest, for example, is protecting the environment.

Like all people, autistic people gain huge amounts of pleasure from pursuing their interests and see them as fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

Being highly focused helps many autistic people do well academically and in the workplace but they can also become so engrossed in particular topics or activities that they neglect other aspects of their lives.

Over- or under-sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. Many autistic people prefer not to hug due to discomfort, which can be misinterpreted as being cold and aloof. Many autistic people avoid everyday situations because of their sensitivity issues. Schools, workplaces and shopping centres can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload.



Extreme anxiety

Anxiety is a real difficulty for many autistic adults, particularly in social situations or when facing change. It can affect a person psychologically and physically and impact quality of life for autistic people and their families.

It is very important that autistic people learn to recognise their triggers and find coping mechanisms to help reduce their anxiety. However, many autistic people have difficulty recognising and regulating their emotions. Over one third of autistic people have serious mental health issues and too many autistic people are being failed by mental health services.

Meltdowns and shutdowns

When everything becomes too much for an autistic person, they can go into meltdown or shutdown. These are very intense and exhausting experiences.

A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be verbal (eg shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (eg kicking, lashing out, biting) or both.

Meltdowns in children are often mistaken for temper tantrums and parents and their autistic children often experience hurtful comments and judgmental stares from less understanding members of the public.

A shutdown appears less intense to the outside world but can be equally debilitating. Shutdowns are also a response to being overwhelmed, but may appear more passive - eg an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'. One autistic woman described having a shutdown as: 'just as frustrating as a meltdown, because of not being able to figure out how to react how I want to, or not being able to react at all; there isn't any 'figuring out' because the mind feels like it is past a state of being able to interpret.'



"If a child is having a meltdown please don't assume they are being "naughty" it's likely they are overwhelmed with the situation and as parents we are trying our best to help them. "

(Wales Primary School parent)

"I might hit developmental and societal milestones in a different order to my peers, but I am able to accomplish these small victories on my own time."

(Wales Primary School parent)

"My child is not naughty, they just find things overwhelming sometimes".

(Wales Primary School parent)

What Our Parents Want You To Know

Here are some quotes from parents of autistic pupils at Wales Primary School;

"Autism is not a disease, it doesn't need a cure."

"Autism is not a tragedy. There is no need to express any sort of pity when you find out my child is autistic."

"Please don't presume an individual with autism won't be able to take part in your child's party, whatever it may be. It may be that the child in question doesn't get invited to a single party, year in year out. As a parent this hurts. "

As an SEN (special educational needs) parent life can be lonely, our child may not play with any children in the class but please include us in the playground."

"Children with autism are colourful- they are often very beautiful, and like rainbows they stand out."

"Please don't judge autism mummy's and daddies by our children's behaviour. We are doing our best and our children understand things differently to yours".

Please teach your child about neurodiversity and we should celebrate this, and that in each class there will be neurodiverse children and we can learn so much from them, particularly around acceptance and friendship.

"Please ask me if unsure about my child's autism and how it affects them, I'd be happy and willing to answer your questions. However, please remember autism is spectrum so how it affects my child may differ slightly from another child with same condition".

The Big 5 things Autistic People want you to know

1. We often need extra time to process information, like questions and instructions
2. We can feel intense anxiety in social situations
3. We sometimes feel anxious about unexpected changes, like delays and cancellations
4. Many of us find noise, smells and bright lights distressing
5. All of these can lead to us becoming overwhelmed and having a 'meltdown' or 'shutdown'. This can be physically and emotionally debilitating.

(Taken from the National Autistic Society website)

