

Autism 101

An introductory guide to Autism for caregivers.

About This Guide

Welcome to Autism 101,

A guide designed to help you and your loved ones on your autism journey. Think of this document as a introduction to autism and a welcome letter to our community at the same time. Revisit it as often as you'd like and use it to build a foundation of knowledge over time. It's been thoughtfully developed by industry leading medical professionals and carefully crafted by communications experts.

Sincerely,
The SAAAC Team

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1. Autism is a different way of wiring in the brain, influencing how autistic people see and interact with the world.

2. Autism is not caused by fault or punishment but is linked to genetic factors, prenatal exposures, and brain development differences, much like having brown eyes or curly hair.

3. Autism is a spectrum because it includes a range of traits with varying intensity and combinations, meaning each individual is unique and experiences Autism differently.

4. Autism affects various aspects of life, including special interests, stims, sensory processing, emotions, motor skills, communication, relationships, and executive functions.

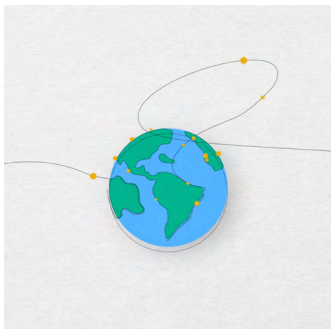
5. Neurodiversity celebrates the fact that our brains are all wired differently and that is okay! There is no “right way” for the brain to work.

6. Embrace diverse perspectives and create a supportive environment to foster growth, manage stress, and promote well-being for both neurodivergent individuals and their caregivers.

1 What is Autism?

Our brain is like a road-map, wired with trillions of connections for navigating the world. With Autism, the brain is wired differently.

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The Basics

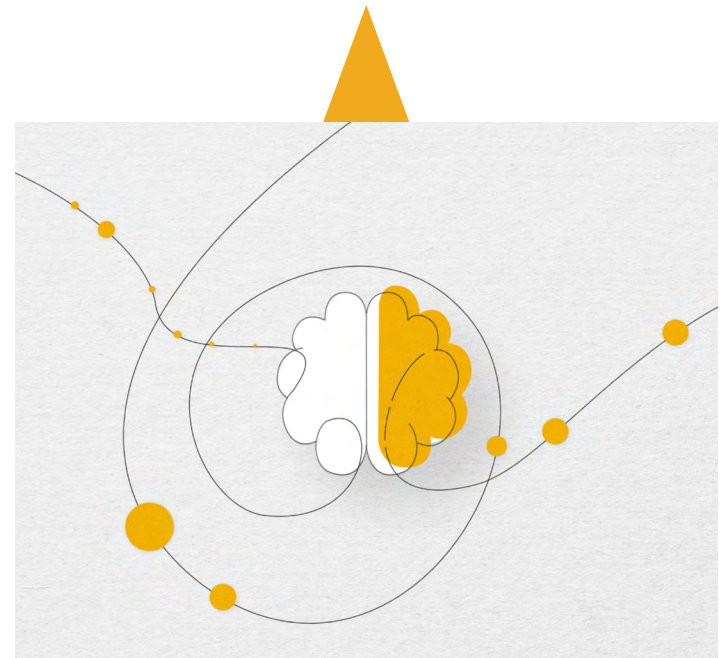
Autism is a unique way that some people's brains are wired, making them neurodivergent, or different from most people.

This wiring can affect how people experience emotions and the environment and how they communicate. It can also involve doing things repetitively or having very focused interests.

Autism and Health

Autism isn't a disease or a sickness like a cold. It is a difference in brain wiring that influences how individuals perceive and interact with the world.

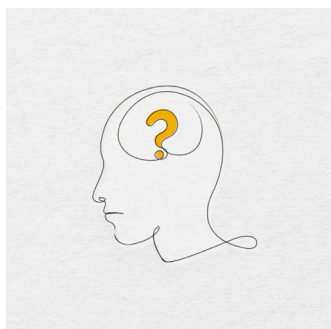
Autism can be associated with health concerns like allergies, gastrointestinal issues, hypermobility, or epilepsy, but being Autistic does not mean a person is unhealthy.



2 What causes Autism?

Autism is **ACTUALLY** caused by many things. Like what's in our genes, what we're exposed to during pregnancy, and the different ways the brain grows.

”



The Truth

Sometimes, people might think Autism is caused by something they did wrong, like bad karma or punishment for past sins.

But that's not true at all. Autism is related to many factors including certain genes, exposures during pregnancy, and differences in brain development. With Autism, the brain has extra connections in certain areas. That's just how some people are born.

Don't Feel Guilty

It's normal to feel guilty or wonder if you did something to cause your loved one's Autism, but Autism isn't anyone's fault. It's like being born with brown eyes or curly hair – it's just part of who they are.

Instead of feeling guilty, it's more helpful to focus on learning about Autism to create a positive environment where they can thrive.



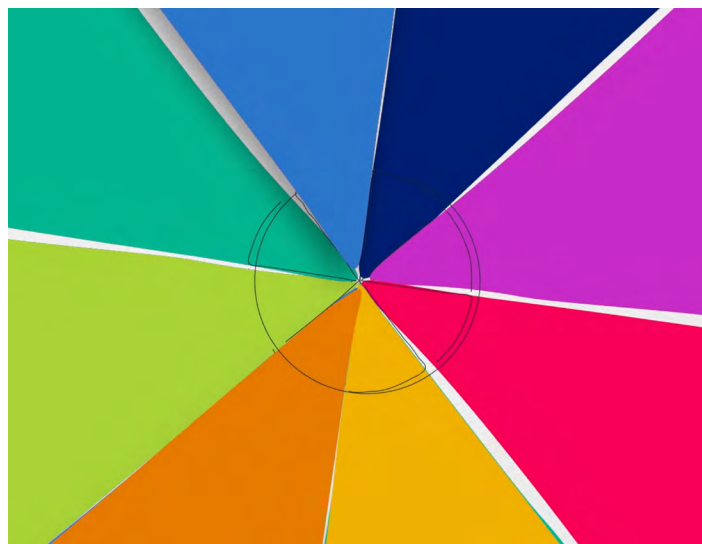
3 The Spectrum.

Autism is a spectrum. It includes a range of traits which can vary in intensity and combinations, meaning each individual is unique and experiences Autism differently.

Why is Autism a spectrum?

The word “spectrum” means that Autism consists of a range of traits that occur in different combinations and intensities among individuals. Every Autistic person is different!

Think of a wheel or a pie chart. Each wedge on the chart represents a different trait, and the more coloured in it is, the stronger the trait is for that person.



Traits

Because Autism is dynamic, the traits a person possesses can change over time and across environments. This means that some days, an Autistic person may be able to manage their daily schedule independently while on other days they may need help. It also means that they may be able to do tasks in one environment, like at home, but not in others, like at school.

The traits a person has on the wheel does not make them “more” or “less” Autistic. Referring to people this way can lead to negative experiences.

For example, if a non-speaking Autistic person is described as “more Autistic”, they may be placed in classes that are too easy for them. On the other hand, if someone has learned to hide or mask their Autistic traits and is described as “less Autistic”, they may be denied access to needed supports.

Neither of these people are more or less Autistic than the other – they are simply different, with different strengths, challenges, and support needs.

As a caregiver, you can use the Autism Wheel to better understand and support your loved one’s strengths and challenges.



4 Traits & Talents.

1

Special Interests (SPINs)

Special interests (SpINs) are topics, objects, or activities that an Autistic person really enjoys. They may change quickly or last a long time. SpINs help Autistic people feel like themselves, relax and feel better about things, focus, and make friends or find a job.

Case Study

Zhao is a 16-year-old Autistic girl who is fascinated with zippers. In therapy, Zhao's parents learned that zippers were her special interest. They found it helpful to buy her all kinds of items with zippers, like pants, backpacks, and pencil cases. Over time, they discovered that she loves it when things fit together perfectly, and bought her puzzles, Legos, and lock and keys. In high school, she is taking a woodworking class.

2

Self-Stimulatory Behaviours (Stims)

Stims are repetitive thoughts or actions done to express oneself, communicate, calm down when anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed, enjoy oneself, or feel good and focus. Different stims include looking closely at things or repeatedly moving the body, making noises or saying words, tasting, smelling, or touching things, chewing on objects or grinding teeth. Stims are important, and if unsafe, can be replaced with a similar option.

Case Study

Maya, a 5-year-old girl, finds comfort in routines and rituals. When she feels overwhelmed or anxious, Maya gently rocks back and forth while softly humming to herself. Maya's teacher has observed that stimming behaviors like rocking are more frequent during transitions or when there are changes in her environment, indicating that this helps her self-regulate and feel more grounded.

3

Sensory Processing Differences

Sensory processing is how the brain interprets information from the senses like sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste to respond appropriately. Some autistic people are highly sensitive and need little input, while others require more. If sensory input is imbalanced, they may seem overwhelmed, distracted, or impulsive, or may miss things.

Case Study

Jasmine, a 5-year-old autistic girl, looks at the floor when spoken to. Her parents initially thought this was disrespectful and tried to teach her to make eye contact. In therapy, they learned that for Jasmine, processing words and faces together can cause sensory overload due to her sensitivity to sights and sounds. Therapy helps Jasmine self-advocate by using scripts to explain her needs to teachers and friends.

4

Emotional Differences

Autistic individuals often have extra brain connections in emotional centers, leading to strong emotions, difficulty recognizing or managing feelings (alexithymia), meltdowns, shutdowns, situational mutism, sensitivity to injustice, and moments of intense happiness (autistic euphoria).

Case Study

Priya, a 7-year-old girl, struggles to identify her emotions and often has meltdowns, shouting "I DON'T KNOW" when asked how she feels. Her parents learned that alexithymia, common in autistic individuals, makes it hard to recognize feelings. They found that discussing events leading up to her meltdowns, along with her physical symptoms (like a pounding heart) and behaviors (like pacing), helps Priya process her emotions and decide what to do next.

What they are:

Everyone has unique traits and characteristics that make us who we are. Autistic people are no different.

But there are 8 common traits and talents that Autistic people have the most.

Explore the list here to see if your child has any similarities.



*Adapted from Matt Lowry's Model of the Autism Spectrum.
Lowry, M. (n.d.). Meme Gallery. The Autism Spectrum. Matt Lowry LPP.

4 Traits & Talents.

5

Fine and Gross Motor Skills

Gross motor skills like strength, balance, and coordination and fine motor skills involving small movements of the fingers may develop at a different pace for autistic people, making it difficult for them to complete everyday tasks like playing sports, tidying up, and tying shoelaces.

Case Study

Jamal, a 5-year-old boy, excels in fine motor skills such as drawing and coloring detailed pictures. However, he experiences challenges with gross motor skills, finding activities like catching a ball or climbing stairs difficult due to coordination issues. Jamal enjoys activities that allow him to showcase his artistic talents and engage in creative expression, which boosts his confidence and self-esteem. He receives accommodations like handrails on both sides and brightly coloured tape on each stair to support his gross motor needs.

6

Communication Differences

Autistic people may speak in a flat tone or character voice, communicate using phrases (echolalia) or memes, jump between topics, speak for a long time about something they're interested in before pausing for others to join in (monologuing or info-dumping), or share their thoughts without speaking at all. This may seem different, but it makes sense to them.

Case Study

Emma, a 4-year-old girl, communicates primarily through echolalia, repeating phrases she hears from her favorite cartoons to express herself. She uses picture cards and gestures to convey her needs and preferences effectively. Initially, it was difficult for Emma's parents but since embracing her communication needs, they have found that incorporating visual supports and using consistent routines enhance her communication skills and help her engage more actively with others.

7

Relationship Differences

Autistic people may interact with others differently. For example, they may enjoy being around others without always interacting with them (parallel interactions), show their affection by offering objects or memes they think you will like (penguin pebbling), prefer deep conversations over small talk, avoid or make very intense eye contact, or require extra reassurance in relationships (rejection sensitivity).

Case Study

Ahmed, a 9-year-old boy, enjoys going to the park and prefers playing alongside his friends rather than directly engaging in games. He shows affection by gifting objects but doesn't initiate hugs or verbal expressions of friendship. His parents notice he is content with parallel play, favoring structured routines and predictable interactions.

*Adapted from Matt Lowry's Model of the Autism Spectrum.
Lowry, M. (n.d.). Meme Gallery. The Autism Spectrum. Matt Lowry LPP.

8

Executive Function Differences (Thinking Skills)

Executive functions include skills like goal setting, planning, and organization. Autistic individuals may find these challenging due to processing extra information. They may need to know what will happen in advance, ask repetitive questions for certainty, and struggle with task initiation and completion.

Case Study

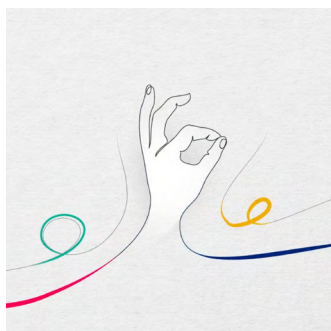
Miguel, a 14-year-old, struggles with cleaning his room because he becomes overwhelmed by details. His parents initially thought he was lazy, but therapy revealed that his brain differences make him "detail oriented" and he struggles with organizing tasks. Instead of seeing the task as a whole, he gets overwhelmed by individual steps like picking up pencils or wiping the mirror. Miguel's parents help him summarize cleaning tasks into an organized plan.

Each Autistic person has traits and talents unique to them. Being unique is what makes us who we are.

5 Embracing Neurodiversity.

Neurodiversity is the idea that our brains all work in different ways – and that’s okay! There’s no “right way” for the brain to work!

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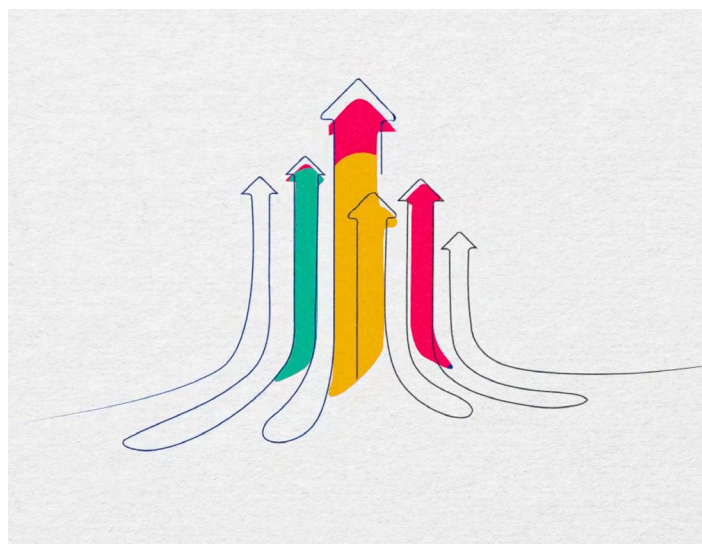
Human Diversity

Human diversity is an important part of life.

Our identities related to race, religion, gender, and abilities, give us different perspectives, which drive innovation and change!

Like how individual building blocks come together to make unique structures, people from different backgrounds come together to create unique ideas.

If everyone were the same, there would be no one to share new perspectives. Indeed, groups of multiple identities create more innovative solutions than groups of single identities.



Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the idea that our brains all work in different ways – and that’s okay! There is no “right way” for the brain to work!

In fact, brain differences are a valuable part of human diversity! The unique thoughts, feelings, and actions of someone with a different brain type can lead to innovative, unique ideas that we all benefit from.

If your brain type is like most people, you are neurotypical. If your brain type is different, like with Autism, you are neurodivergent. Approximately 15–20% of the world’s population is neurodivergent!*

The brain guides how we think, feel, and act, so it is often easier to understand people who share the same brain type. Struggling to understand someone with a different brain type might feel scary at first, and that’s okay. You can replace fear with understanding by taking time to learn about how their brain works!



6 What can I do?

What's normal is a matter of perspective, so when we talk about what it means to be human, let's think bigger, because there's no one-size-fits-all approach.

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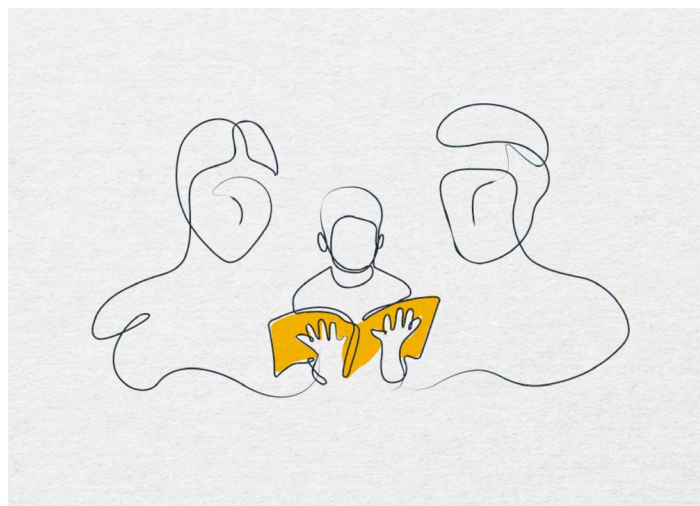
Reconsider “Normal”

People often behave in specific ways to be seen as “normal”. But here's the thing: what's normal varies between cultures. For example, in some cultures, it is normal to greet people with a kiss on the cheek, while in others, a handshake is typical.

The same goes for Autistic traits. For example, Autistic people may have intense interests on specific activities. In some cultures, this may be seen as a sign of talent, while in others it may be viewed as obsessive or unhealthy.

Many Autistic adults express that neurotypical norms like making small talk feel abnormal.

What's normal is a matter of perspective, so when we discuss what it means to be human, let's think bigger, because there's no one-size-fits-all approach.



Take Care of Your Physical and Mental Health

Caregivers of Autistic children can face mental and physical health challenges.

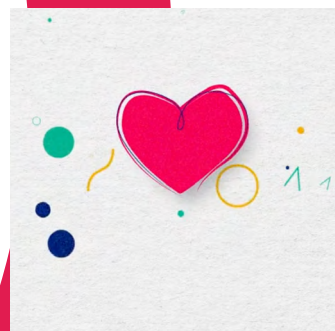
When their child is diagnosed, many caregivers may feel guilty and worried about the future which can lead to higher blood pressure, headaches, sleep disruptions, gastrointestinal issues, respiratory conditions, and obesity. It's crucial to focus on managing these symptoms while navigating a new diagnosis.

Build a Supportive Network: Strengthen connections with family, friends, and community organizations. Seek respite care, whether formal or informal, to help you relax. Make time for relationships that matter and reach out when feeling isolated. Engage in creative interests and hobbies outside of caregiving to recharge.

Explore Your Emotions: Understanding and managing your emotions is key to handling stress. Practice mindfulness, self-compassion, and consider individual counseling to develop these skills in a judgment-free space.

Focus on the Positive: Acknowledge and celebrate strengths and small achievements. Be kind to yourself and focus on solutions rather than getting fixated on the problem.

Caregivers report that raising an autistic child can be fulfilling. Focus on learning to manage your stress and building your knowledge and skills related to Autism.



6 What can I do?

The most important thing you can do to support your Autistic loved one is create a calm and supportive environment to help them feel safe.



Create a Calm Environment

The brain is divided into two major sections: the “learning brain”, which is calm and ready to try new things, and the “survival brain”, which is activated by stress and is uncomfortable and afraid.

Autistic people spend more time in their “survival brain” because of distressing relationship experiences and the mismatch between the actual environment and their sensory and emotional needs.

The most important thing you can do to support your Autistic loved one is create a calm and supportive environment to help them feel safe and move into their “learning brain”.

Try the following:

- 1) Create a Calm, Organized Home environment: order and predictability are calming!
 - Keep items in consistent spots.
 - Reduce clutter.
 - Use closed shelving for storage.
 - Create a “calm down” area that is quiet, dim, and comfortable.

2) Practice Calming Yourself

Feelings like stress spread to others. Using relaxation tools throughout the day will help your child feel calm and safe. Practice the tools when you are calm before using them under stress.

Deep breathing: Lay down or sit comfortably. Focus your attention on your breathing, inhale through your nose and exhale through rounded lips until all the air is out of your belly. Repeat several times until you feel calm.

*Adapted from Gillian Boudreau 2024 Neurodiversity Affirming Therapy CE Summit Presentatio Stress Steals Bandwidth: Cultivating a more equitable culture of calm when working with children. The 2024 Neurodiversity Affirming Therapy CE Summit.

Grounding: Focus your attention on what you see, hear, feel, or smell in this moment to calm racing thoughts. Complete the exercise with your eyes closed or while doing an activity like washing dishes. Notice the warm water running on your skin or the smell of oranges filling the air.

Gentle movements: 1) Sit or stand, slowly raise one knee at a time, touching the knee with your opposite hand. Switch the knee you raise each time while counting to 60. 2) Sit or stand with feet shoulder width apart and a slight bend in your knees. Slowly turn your upper body from left to right letting your arms swing around you while counting to 30.

3) Work with Your Doctor to Explore Options for Diagnosis and Intervention

You may experience worry and stress hearing about the importance of early intervention. It's most important that you and your child feel calm and safe, so try to take a deep breath and take things day by day. If it is suspected that your child may be Autistic, speak to your family doctor. If you've received a diagnosis, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and behaviour therapy may be helpful.

Thanks



For more info:

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References

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