

Understanding autism

What is autism?

Autism can be tricky to define. Autism is a developmental condition that affects how a person learns and interacts with the world around them. Because autism has many different characteristics, no two people on the spectrum are alike. Every Autistic person is different to every other. This is why autism is described as a 'spectrum'. Aspect describes autism as *a different brilliant*®

How many people are on the autism spectrum?

The current research suggests that an estimated 1 in 70 people in Australia on the autism spectrum. Autism can be diagnosed in people from all cultural and economic backgrounds. The characteristics of autism may appear in early childhood, but sometimes they can go unrecognised until later in life.



What are the myths and misunderstandings about characteristics of autism?

There are lots of myths and misunderstandings about autism but while many Autistic people experience difficulties, with the right support [Autistic people can achieve a great quality of life](#).

There is also a misconception that the autism spectrum is linear. In fact, Autistic people can display a wide range of characteristics in their strengths, communications, social interactions, leisure and play.

Some of the characteristics of autism:

Strengths and Interests

- Areas of strength vary but include: logical or visual thinking, persistence, eye for detail, good skills with technology, memory for facts and figures
- Very strong focus on specific interest areas
- Deep interest in typical topics such as Pokémon, sport, Disney or trains or more unusual topics e.g. air conditioners or bins
- Up to 20% of Autistic people have exceptional or above average skills in one or more areas such as reading, maths, art, mechanics, music, memory etc

Social Interactions

- Using sounds, signs, gestures or pictures to communicate instead of spoken words
- Taking extra time to understand spoken information
- Discomfort in busy complex social situations
- Might prefer to play alone or next to others more than with them
- An ability to pay attention without making eye contact
- Using or responding to body language differently
- Social interactions are often misunderstood by non-autistic people

Communication

- Communicate honestly and directly
- A dislike or difficulty with small talk, sarcasm or understanding jokes
- Repeating words or phrases in a way that can seem out of context
- Not using or understanding gestures like pointing

Leisure and Play

- Preference for leisure based on passions
- Non-traditional play such as repetitive lining up of toys
- Preferring to do things in the same way
- Comfortable socialising through technology such as phones, video conferencing or online chats and games

Sensory

- Being constantly aware or more aware of some sensations (sounds, smells, tastes, touch etc)
- Feeling distressed or overwhelmed if there are too many sensations at once (loud noises, lots of touching, bright lights etc)
- Working hard to avoid distress by covering ears, hiding in quiet places, etc to block out sensations
- Discomfort with touch such as materials of clothes, tags or light touch from others
- Seeking sensory experiences by smelling food, flicking fingers in front of lights
- Not noticing internal sensations like hunger or pain

Thinking

- An uneven pattern of thinking abilities
- An ability to focus on one thing for a very long time;
- Difficulty switching from one thing to another
- An ability to notice specific details, patterns or changes that other people are unaware of

Experiencing and displaying emotions

- A strong, sometimes overwhelming, emotional connection to others
- Repeating movements such as flapping hands or pacing around to show excitement or to help cope with stress
- Delay in learning to understand and regulate emotions
- Difficulties understanding how non-autistic people think in some situations (Just as non-autistic people have difficulty understanding autistic people)
- Rather than thinking of the autism spectrum as a line, it is more like a 'constellation'.

Autism is a different brilliant®

Aspect offers a comprehensive approach, based on the idea of a *different brilliant*®, that:

- **Respects difference and diversity**
- **Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs**
- **Develops autism-friendly environments**
- **Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.**

a different brilliant®
understanding, engaging & celebrating the
strengths, interests & aspirations
of people on the autism spectrum



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