

Autism assessment and functional assessment: what's the difference?

Autism assessments and functional assessments provide different kinds of information. While they have different purposes, together they can provide a more complete picture of a person's strengths, experiences and support needs.

Our purpose
a different brilliant®

Understanding, engaging
and celebrating the strengths,
interests and aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.

What is an autism assessment?

An autism assessment explores whether a person is Autistic or not.

The assessment looks at the way a person communicates, interacts with others and experiences the world, as well as their developmental history, strengths and differences.

For many Autistic people and families, receiving a diagnosis can provide **clarity and understanding**. It can help make sense of experiences and provide important information about how an individual communicates, processes sensory information, learns and engages with the world.

For the individual, diagnosis can support **self-understanding, identity and self-advocacy**. It also helps families, educators and professionals provide more personalised, autism-informed support.

What is a functional assessment?

A functional assessment looks at **how a person manages everyday activities and what support they may need to participate in daily life**.

Depending on the person and the purpose of the assessment, this might include areas such as:

- communication
- learning
- self-care and daily living
- sensory needs
- relationships and social participation
- mobility
- participation at home, school, work or in the community.

Functional assessments help identify a person's strengths, areas where they may need support, and strategies or adjustments that could help. Why can both be valuable?

What's the difference?



As an analogy, think about a child who is having difficulty seeing the smart board at school. An eye assessment that identifies shortsightedness and helps us understand **why** they can't see the smart board.

Knowing this informs us **what may help** – eyeglasses or contacts.

Similarly, an autism assessment provides important context that can help us understand the person and their experiences to determine if they are Autistic. A functional assessment helps identify what supports a person may need.

Different information. A more complete understanding.

Autism assessment and functional assessment aren't competing approaches, and one doesn't simply replace the other.

Diagnosis can help us understand the person and determine if a person's experiences are autism or a different underlying factor. Functional assessment can help us understand the support they need, which can fluctuate and change over time.

Together, these different perspectives can contribute to support that is more individualised, respectful and meaningful.



Diagnosis is about more than accessing services

An autism diagnosis can have value throughout a person's life. Many Autistic people describe diagnosis as providing validation and a greater understanding of themselves. It may help someone communicate their needs, advocate for themselves, connect with other Autistic people and understand experiences that may previously have been misunderstood.

For children, greater understanding can also help parents, carers and educators recognise their individual strengths and needs and consider how environments, communication and expectations can be adapted to support them.

Additional resources

- *a different brilliant®* podcast about autism and functional assessments: www.youtube.com/watch?v=56yuQvS7rUw
- *The Conversation* – "NDIS eligibility will be based on 'functional capacity', not diagnostic labels. But what does that mean?": <https://theconversation.com/ndis-eligibility-will-be-based-on-functional-capacity-not-diagnostic-labels-but-what-does-that-mean-281319>
- NDIS: What is a functional capacity assessment: www.ndis.gov.au/applying/types-assessments/what-functional-capacity-assessment
- Amaze: Autism Assessment and diagnosis Australia: www.amaze.org.au/understand-autism/assessment-and-diagnosis/

Want to learn more?

Aspect provides autism assessments for children, adolescents and adults, as well as a range of information and resources about autism.

Visit [aspect.org.au/assessment](https://www.aspect.org.au/assessment)

Call 1800 277 328

Based on the idea of a different brilliant®, Aspect's approach:

- 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.