



Interacting with Autistic people

A guide for Australian police


Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Research Centre
for Autism Practice

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About 1 in 40 Australians is Autistic*, so during your career it is likely you will encounter and work with Autistic people.

*Aspect calculation based on prevalence studies conducted from 2019–23

About autism

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a person thinks, communicates, and interacts with the world. About 1 in 40 Australians are Autistic. Autistic individuals may experience differences in social communication, sensory processing, and flexibility in thinking. Certain strengths are also common among Autistic people including honesty, a strong sense of justice, attention to detail, problem-solving skills, and deep focus on areas of interest.

Autism and police interactions

Autistic individuals may interact with law enforcement in a variety of situations – as victims, witnesses, suspects, or members of the community seeking assistance. Unfortunately, Autistic people are at significantly higher risk of victimisation, including physical assault, sexual violence, financial exploitation, and online abuse. Difficulties with social awareness or recognising unsafe situations can make Autistic individuals more vulnerable to coercion and manipulation. Communication challenges may also mean that crimes against them go unreported or that they struggle to describe their experiences in a way that is understood by police. Prior negative experiences with police – such as feeling dismissed, misunderstood, or being mistakenly treated as a suspect – can also lead to a reluctance to report crimes, further increasing their vulnerability. Officers who are aware of these risks can help ensure Autistic victims feel safe, believed, and supported when reporting crimes.

Autistic individuals may also require police assistance in situations where they are lost, overwhelmed, or in distress. Some may struggle with navigating public spaces or experience sensory overload, which can lead to behaviours

that bystanders misinterpret as suspicious or non-compliant. In crisis situations, Autistic individuals may not respond to verbal commands in expected ways or may engage in self-soothing behaviours (e.g. rocking, hand-flapping) that could be mistaken for agitation. Recognising these behaviours as part of an Autistic response to stress can help officers de-escalate situations and provide appropriate support.

While Autistic individuals are far more likely to be victims of crime than offenders, some may come into contact with police as suspects. This can be due to social misunderstandings, rigid rule-following, or being manipulated by others. Officers who are trained in autism can help ensure fair treatment, reduce miscommunication, and prevent unnecessary escalation.

An understanding of autism can help officers:

- **Communicate effectively and minimise misunderstandings**
- **Reduce the risk of escalating situations unnecessarily**
- **Provide appropriate support when interacting with Autistic individuals**
- **Build trust and confidence between police and the Autistic community.**

Autistic characteristics

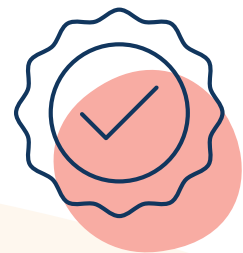


Social communication

Language ability varies widely among Autistic people, ranging from being non-verbal to highly fluent and articulate. Some Autistic people rely on alternative communication methods, including sign language or the use of pictures or symbols on devices like iPads. Even fluent speakers may prefer alternative communication methods, especially when stressed.

It's important for police officers to recognise that an Autistic person's communication abilities may not always align with their level of understanding. Some individuals may use complex or fluent speech while having difficulty processing instructions or questions, which can result in misunderstandings or unintentional non-compliance. In other cases, Autistic people may have oral motor difficulties that impact their ability to speak clearly even though their understanding is at a high level, leading others to underestimate their abilities. This is also important for police to recognise, as assumptions about a person's communication abilities can impact how their statements are interpreted, their credibility as a witness, or their ability to understand legal processes.

Autistic people may communicate in ways that differ from non-Autistic people and this can result in misunderstandings during interactions with police officers. These differences can include:



Eye contact: Many Autistic people find making or maintaining eye contact uncomfortable or unnatural. Police officers might mistakenly interpret this as evasiveness, discomfort, or dishonesty, when in reality, it is simply a common aspect of autistic communication.

Literal interpretation of language: Autistic individuals may take things literally, making it difficult for them to understand figurative language, sarcasm, humour, or implied meaning. This can lead to confusion or misunderstanding if police use phrases that are not clear or direct.

"Small talk": Many Autistic people may not follow the neurotypical patterns of casual conversation, greetings, or responding to social cues, such as the level of formality expected in particular situations. This can be misinterpreted by officers as rudeness or non-compliance, when it is simply a different way of engaging socially.

Interpreting tone of voice and body language:

Autistic individuals may not always understand non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language, which can make it harder for them to gauge how someone feels or what is expected during an interaction. This can lead to misunderstandings, especially if officers assume the individual knows how to interpret such cues.

Turn-taking in conversation: In conversations, some Autistic people may not naturally sense when it's their turn to speak or may interrupt unintentionally. This can cause confusion during questioning or interviews with law enforcement.



Sensory processing differences

Sensory processing differences are common among Autistic people and can vary widely from person to person. These differences involve how the brain receives, processes, and responds to sensory information from the environment. These differences can include:

Hyper-sensitivity: Many Autistic individuals are more sensitive to certain sensory stimuli, which can cause them to become overwhelmed or distressed. This might include:

- loud sounds (e.g. sirens, crowded environments, or loud conversations)
- bright or flickering lights (e.g. fluorescent lighting)
- textures or fabrics (e.g. certain clothing materials or foods)
- strong smells (e.g. perfumes, cleaning products)
- touch (e.g. unexpected physical contact can feel uncomfortable or even painful).

These heightened sensitivities can lead to feelings of anxiety, irritability, or distress in certain environments.

Hypo-sensitivity: On the other hand, some Autistic individuals may experience lower sensitivity to sensory input, meaning they may seek out stronger sensory experiences to feel engaged or alert. This can include:

- seeking loud sounds (e.g. enjoying loud music or sounds)
- craving deep pressure (e.g. liking tight clothing or heavy blankets)
- enjoying intense textures (e.g. feeling satisfaction from rough fabrics or certain food textures)
- increased pain tolerance (e.g. not reacting to injury or discomfort in the same way others might).

These sensory-seeking behaviours can sometimes be misinterpreted as unusual or disruptive by those around them.

These sensory differences can impact daily life and interactions, particularly in busy places or unfamiliar situations like police encounters. It's important for police officers to be aware of how sensory differences may influence behaviour, communication, and responses to stress, and to approach situations with patience and understanding.





Behaviours

Autistic individuals may exhibit certain behavioural differences that can influence how they respond in various situations, including interactions with law enforcement.

Preference for routine and predictability

Many Autistic people feel a strong need for routine and predictability in their daily lives. They may become distressed if something unexpected happens or if routines are disrupted. For example, they might follow the same route to work every day, eat the same meal at specific times, or have a strict bedtime routine. If a routine is disrupted during an encounter with law enforcement, an Autistic person might become anxious, upset, or even non-compliant, not because they are being defiant but because the disruption causes them stress. For example, if they are asked to take a different route during a traffic stop or told to leave a place they feel comfortable, they may struggle to adapt, which could be misinterpreted as resistance.

Strong interests

Autistic individuals often have intense, focused interests in specific topics or activities. These interests can range from collecting things, like model trains or coins, to very specific knowledge areas, like certain historical events, animals, or even specific types of technology. Strong interests can lead to interactions with police whereby an Autistic individual may be so focused on pursuing an interest that they engage in dangerous or illegal behaviour such as trespassing on private property to observe a specific location or spending excessive time in an area where their presence may be considered suspicious. When approached by police they may be so focused on discussing their interest that they fail to respond appropriately to questions or instructions, potentially causing confusion or being misunderstood as uncooperative.

Repetitive movements and coping with stress

Repetitive movements (sometimes referred to as stimming) are common in autism and can include actions like hand-flapping, rocking, repeating words or phrases (echolalia), or making repetitive

sounds. These movements serve important functions, such as self-soothing, regulating emotions, or managing sensory overload.

During an interaction with police, an Autistic person might tap their foot, hand-flap, or rock back and forth to cope with stress. These actions are not signs of aggression or defiance but adaptive strategies that help them regulate anxiety and sensory input. If misunderstood, these movements could be mistakenly perceived as agitation or non-compliance, potentially escalating a situation. Recognising stimming as a natural and helpful response allows officers to approach interactions with greater awareness and reduce unnecessary intervention.

Autistic people may also display strong emotional or physiological responses to distress, such as crying, yelling, shaking, or engaging in repetitive movements (e.g. rocking or hand-flapping). In some cases, a person may engage in self-injurious movements, such as head-banging, as a response to extreme overwhelm.

This can lead to what is commonly referred to as a "meltdown" – an involuntary reaction to overwhelming stress, sensory overload, or emotional distress. A meltdown is not a tantrum or an attempt to be defiant but rather a loss of self-regulation due to an overloaded nervous system.

Some Autistic individuals may instead experience a shutdown, in which they become temporarily unable to communicate, withdraw, or attempt to leave the situation. Understanding that meltdowns and shutdowns are distress responses—not threats or deliberate non-compliance—can help officers respond with de-escalation strategies that prioritise safety and support.

Possible indicators of autism

Autism is a spectrum meaning individuals will present differently. However, officers may notice certain behaviours or communication differences that could suggest a person is Autistic.

In the community:

- Repetitive or distinctive body movements (e.g. hand-flapping, rocking, tapping, or pacing)
- Limited, inconsistent, or avoidance of eye contact
- Responding to social cues in ways that differ from expectations (e.g. not reacting to gestures, facial expressions, or small talk in a typical way)
- Highly focused interest in a specific object or topic (e.g. deeply engaged in an item, discussion, or repetitive action)
- Strong reactions to sensory stimuli (e.g. covering ears due to loud noises, avoiding certain textures or fabrics, or showing distress in response to bright lights or strong smells)
- Distinctive speech patterns (e.g. speaking in a monotone, using formal or precise language, repeating phrases, or using scripted speech)
- Facial expressions that may appear less typical (e.g. a neutral expression even when engaged, or showing facial emotions differently than expected)

In an interview setting:

- Literal interpretation of language (e.g. understanding words and phrases in their most direct meaning, which may lead to unexpected responses)
- Difficulty with abstract or open-ended questions (e.g. finding it easier to answer specific, concrete questions rather than ones requiring interpretation or emotional reflection)
- Needing extra time to respond or providing highly detailed answers (e.g. requiring more time to process questions, or offering thorough, fact-based responses instead of brief replies)



What can police do during general encounters?

Reduce sensory overload

When possible, create a calm environment by reducing the sensory input. Turn off sirens and flashing lights. Find a quiet space to interact with them.

Use clear, direct communication

Keep communication clear, concise, and direct. Provide reassurance and clear, step-by-step instructions during interactions. Avoid vague or figurative language (e.g., “I need you to come clean” or “cut to the chase”) and instead ask straightforward, specific questions. Be aware that some Autistic people may prefer alternative methods of communication, like writing, texting or drawing. They may carry a communication device or iPad and may require their alternative communication method to communicate. A person’s preferred communication method may not always be immediately apparent or easy to understand. When possible, ask a caregiver, teacher, support staff, or neighbour for advice on communication.

Give extra processing time

Some Autistic individuals need more time to understand and respond to questions. Officers should allow pauses after speaking rather than repeating or rephrasing too quickly, which can cause stress.

Minimise escalation

Minimise escalation by speaking in a quiet, calm, and reassuring manner. If a person is experiencing a meltdown or shutdown—which may involve crying, screaming, pacing, becoming physically reactive, or withdrawing completely—and they are not posing a risk to themselves or others, provide time and a safe space for them to regulate.

To support de-escalation:

- Reduce verbal language and avoid unnecessary questioning.
- Do not touch, restrain, or remove comfort objects unless absolutely necessary for safety.
- Allow stimming and other self-regulation strategies rather than attempting to stop them.



Meltdowns and shutdowns are involuntary responses to overwhelming distress, not acts of aggression or defiance. Simply ensuring a safe, low-demand environment and giving the individual time to recover is the most effective approach.

Avoid misinterpreting behaviours

Be aware that certain behaviours, such as avoiding eye contact, repetitive speech, stimming, fidgeting, or delayed responses, are characteristic of autism and not indicative of deceit or non-compliance. Recognising these behaviours can prevent unnecessary escalation.



Interviewing Autistic people

Being interviewed by police may be an extremely stressful experience for an Autistic person. Social communication and memory differences make investigative interviews difficult for Autistic people. Elevated stress and anxiety may affect the person's ability to recall details or provide the best evidence.

Before interviewing, provide the person with details around the structure and expectations of the interview. If possible, ask if the individual has any sensory needs, like sensitivity to bright lights or loud noises. Then, adapt the interview environment to support those sensory needs.

Be mindful of individual needs during the interview, such as allowing breaks, accommodating a comforting object or support person, or respecting self-regulatory behaviours like stimming.

During interviews:

Dos	Don'ts
Follow a logical, chronological order in questioning	Use non-literal language e.g. "it sounds like you saw red"
Use short, simple, unambiguous questions	Use multi-part questions "Was anyone at the house when you arrived and was the door unlocked?"
Allow extra time	Rely on intonation to indicate that a statement is actually a question e.g. rather than "you were alone?" ask "were you alone?"
Break down questioning e.g. rather than "Tell me what happened when you got home yesterday?" ask "what time did you get home?", "who was there when you got home?" "what did you see when you went inside?" what happened then?"	Use "tag" questions e.g. "you went to the park, didn't you?"
Always leave an option open e.g. rather than "was it a child or an adult?" ask "was it a child or an adult or are you not sure?"	Use present tense when asking about the past e.g. "so now you are at the shop and talking to your friend"
Signpost the topic e.g. "I am going to ask you about who you live with "	Use double negatives e.g. "you wouldn't disagree that it would have been dark outside, would you?"
	Use leading questions e.g. rather than "did you see John at the park?" ask "Who did you see at the park?"

When Autistic people go missing

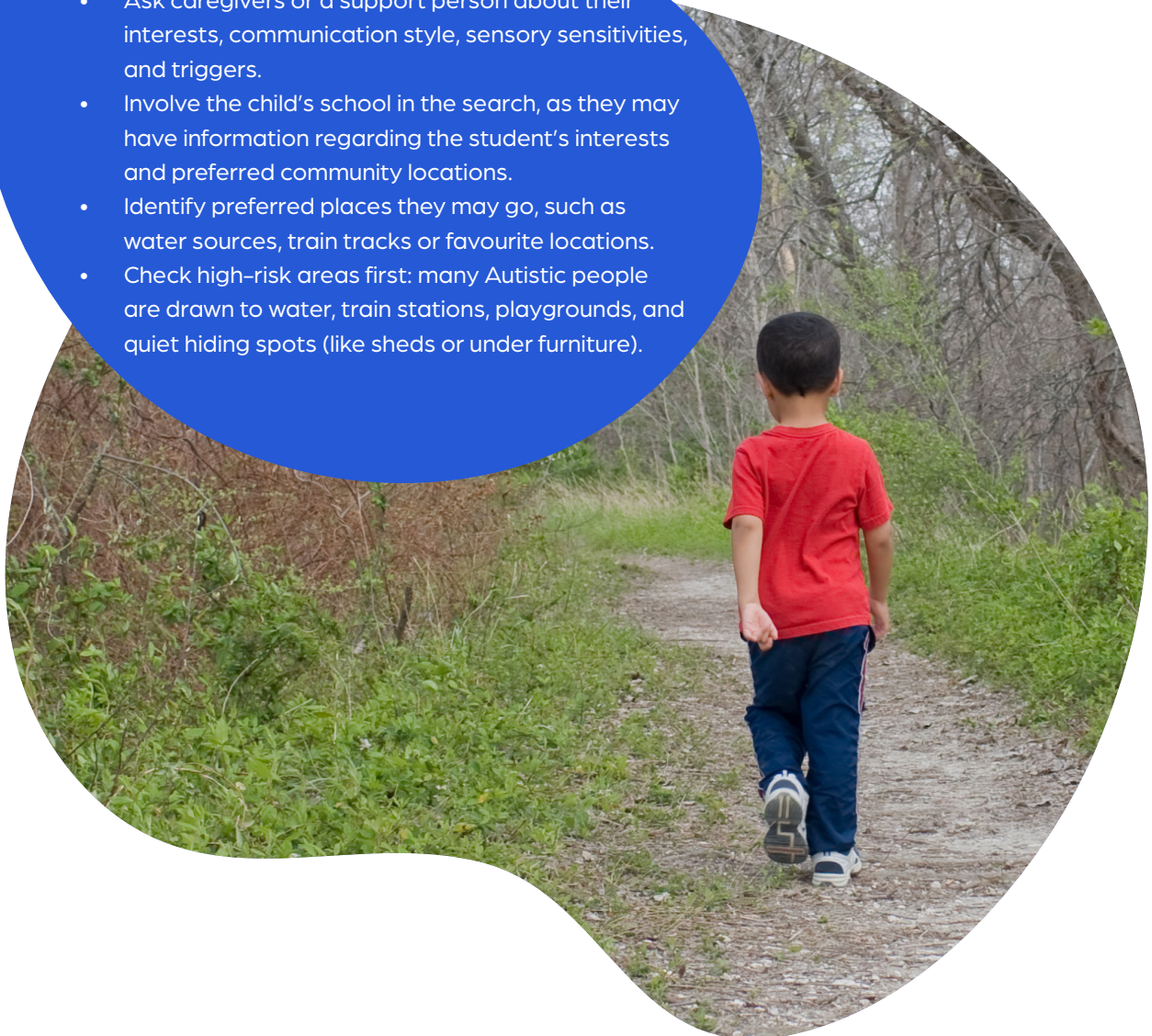
Autistic people, particularly children, demonstrate elopement or wandering behaviour, which can stem from feelings of curiosity, avoidance, or fear. Elopement is associated with increased safety risks, with Autistic children significantly more likely to die from drowning than their non-Autistic peers.

Often parents and caregivers will involve the police to support the return of the individual. Autistic individuals may not respond to their name or may hide from unfamiliar people. They may not be able to communicate their name, address, or phone number.



Here are a few guidelines for support:

- Ask caregivers or a support person about their interests, communication style, sensory sensitivities, and triggers.
- Involve the child's school in the search, as they may have information regarding the student's interests and preferred community locations.
- Identify preferred places they may go, such as water sources, train tracks or favourite locations.
- Check high-risk areas first: many Autistic people are drawn to water, train stations, playgrounds, and quiet hiding spots (like sheds or under furniture).



Case studies

Case Study 1: Jordan

Situation

Jordan, a 22-year-old Autistic man, reports to a store manager that his phone was stolen in a shopping centre. He appears very anxious and initially is having difficulty describing what happened.



Officer response

1. Create a supportive environment – Find a quiet space to take Jordan's statement, reducing background noise and distractions.
2. Use clear, direct questions – Ask one question at a time (e.g. "What did the person look like?" instead of "Tell me everything that happened").
3. Be patient and allow processing time – Give Jordan extra time to recall details without pressure.
4. Offer alternative communication methods – If Jordan finds verbal communication challenging, provide options like writing or using a visual aid.
5. Ensure access to support – Share information about victim support services and check if Jordan needs help understanding legal processes.

Case Study 2: Sara

Situation

Police receive a call that a young woman is pacing outside a store and talking to herself. The caller describes the behaviour as "suspicious". When officers arrive, the young woman (Sara) does not immediately acknowledge them and does not make eye contact. They observe that she is repeating phrases, has her hands over her ears and appears distressed.



Officer response

1. Approach calmly and respectfully – Avoid sudden movements or loud voices.
2. Introduce yourself clearly – Use a calm tone and simple language (e.g. "Hi, I'm Officer Smith. I just want to check if you're okay.")
3. Recognise signs of distress – Understand that behaviours like repeating words and pacing are often self-regulation strategies, not signs of danger.
4. Ask how you can help – Instead of assuming wrongdoing, ask if Sara needs support or assistance.
5. Connect with support If needed – If further assistance is required, help Sara to get in touch with a trusted person or crisis response team.



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aspect.org.au/arcap | research@aspect.org.au