

# What is Autism?

*Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism) is a complex developmental disability that is neurobiological. This means it relates to how the brain interprets information and responds to it.*

People with Autism experience differences in the way they communicate socially. Their behaviour may be repetitive or narrowly focussed. People with Autism also tend to experience differences with their senses that can affect the way they react to their surroundings.

Although the core characteristics of Autism may cause some challenges, they can also result in special skills and abilities. When getting to know a student with Autism, it is important not only to learn about their challenges but also to recognise their strengths!

## The Characteristics of Autism

People with Autism experience different degrees of difficulty in two core areas – ‘Social Communication’ and ‘Behaviour’. A person’s exact experience in these two areas is specific to them.

For example, some people with Autism will find communicating with others hard, yet have no difficulties with noisy or busy situations. Others may experience the opposite or have different strengths and difficulties altogether.

## Social Communication

In social situations, communication is about more than simply understanding what other people are saying. There are many unspoken rules that underpin social interactions, which change based on the situation and people involved. Some people with Autism speak fluently while others have limited speech or do not talk at all.

## How Social Communication affects students with Autism

Although no two students with Autism will be the same, they all face challenges in interacting and communicating with others. Students with Autism may:

- Prefer to be on their own rather than interact with their peers or with adults
- Not respond when people speak or gesture toward them, even when their name is called
- Make little eye contact with others

While some people with Autism will seek solitude, others may also have a strong desire for relationships – though help with forming friendships is often needed.

## Varying levels of understanding vs communication

It is important to be aware that the communication abilities of a student with Autism is not necessarily equal to their ability to understand and process information.

For example, someone with a very limited ability to express themselves may have a much greater understanding than is immediately apparent. Similarly, someone else who has a high level of verbal skills and is able to get their point across may have great difficulty understanding, processing and reacting to information presented to them.

Students with Autism may:

- Be very ‘concrete’ or literal in their understanding of language
- Have very few words that they can use to express themselves and therefore need communication support
- Talk with ease, particularly about interests that are important to them, with little understanding that others may not be interested



## Behaviour

The following behaviours all fall within the Behaviour area of characterising Autism:

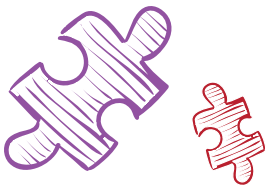
- **Repetitive Actions** – doing or saying something over and over again (including routines)
- **Intense Interests** – a higher degree of interest in a particular topic or activity than others may experience
- **Sensory Processing** – differences in how the person processes information that is provided by their senses, which can result in unusual or unexpected behavioural responses

These behaviours are often connected. When the world is overwhelming and unpredictable, they can give a person with Autism a sense of predictability and comfort.

## Differences in Thinking: Theory of Mind

People with Autism tend to think quite differently, which may lead to some challenges but can also result in some unique strengths. Three concepts that help explain these differences are:

- **Theory of Mind** – the ability to gauge the thoughts, intentions, feelings and mental states of other people (including being able to empathise or ‘put themselves in some else’s shoes’)
- **Executive Function** – the high level cognitive skills that involve managing our thoughts, actions and emotions in order to get things done (such as organisation, focussing, remembering and responding appropriately)
- **Central Coherence** – the ability to pull information together and make sense of it, depending on the situation or circumstance (including being able to look for the ‘bigger picture’ and overall meaning)



## How differences in thinking affects students with Autism

These differences in thinking can affect students in various ways, including:

- **Challenges with Theory of Mind** – can sometimes be misunderstood as being uncaring, when in fact it is the impairment that may cause them to do or say ‘the wrong thing’
- **Challenges with Executive Function** – having trouble getting started on tasks, remembering what to do, multi-tasking, prioritising different tasks, keeping track of activities or personal items and so on
- **Challenges with Central Coherence** – focussing on specific details at the expense of understanding the overall picture of a situation or experience (though this may also mean excellent attention to detail!)



*This content has been extracted from the Autism Association of WA's Autism Heroes Publication.*

*Designed with the Australian National Curriculum in mind, the Autism Heroes Education Pack contains lesson plans, a video and worksheets for students in Years 3–6. It also includes a range of resources that are designed to help you prepare and deliver the pack and to support understanding of Autism within your school. To find out more about this pack, or to purchase a copy visit: <https://autismheroes.autism.org.au/>*