

What is autism? A parent's guide to understanding

When a parent first hears that their child may be autistic, it's common to feel a mix of emotions such as curiosity, relief, worry, or even confusion. One of the most important things to know is this: autism is not something "wrong" with your child. It's simply a different way of experiencing the world, and with the right understanding and support, autistic children can thrive.

What is Autism?

Autism (sometimes called Autism Spectrum Condition or ASC) is a neurodevelopmental difference. This means that an autistic brain processes information, communication, and experiences differently to non-autistic brains. Some people might find it easier to notice patterns, focus deeply on interests, or think creatively. At the same time, things like noisy environments, social situations, or unexpected changes can sometimes feel overwhelming.

A Spectrum of Experiences

Every autistic child is different, just as every non-autistic child is different. Autism is described as a "spectrum," not because it runs from "mild" to "severe," but because there are many different ways autism can be experienced and expressed.

For example, some children may have deep, focused interests in a favourite topic, or prefer familiar routines and predictability. Others might find noisy or busy environments overwhelming, or communicate in ways that differ from non-autistic children.

Some use spoken words, while others may rely on gestures, writing, sign language, or communication devices. Every profile is different, and it can even change depending on the situation or how much energy the child has.

It's important not to make assumptions. Two autistic children may share the same diagnosis but have very different strengths and needs.



Supporting Your Child

If you think your child may be autistic, or they have recently had an assessment, here are some ways to support them:

- **Learn together** – Read, watch, and listen to autistic voices to better understand how your child might experience the world.
- **Celebrate their interests** – Whether it's dinosaurs, trains, art, or coding, showing interest in their passions helps build confidence.
- **Create supportive environments** – Small changes, like quieter spaces or clear routines, can reduce stress and help your child thrive.
- **Focus on communication** – Whether your child uses words, pictures, devices, or gestures, valuing their communication style is key.

Seek community – Many families find comfort and practical advice in connecting with other parents and autistic adults.

Challenges and Strengths



Autistic children may experience challenges, especially in a world designed for non-autistic people. For example, sensory differences are very common: some children may be highly sensitive to sounds, lights, or clothing textures, while others might seek out certain sensations, like spinning, touching, or repeating movements (sometimes called stimming). These behaviours are not "wrong". They are often ways of self-soothing, regulating emotions, or simply enjoying a comforting sensation.

Too often, autism is only spoken about in terms of challenges. But autistic children also bring wonderful strengths and qualities. Some examples include:

- **Strong focus and dedication:** When interested in something, many autistic children develop impressive knowledge and skills.
- **Honesty and authenticity:** Autistic children often communicate directly and sincerely.
- **Creativity and innovation:** Seeing the world differently can lead to fresh ideas and new perspectives.
- **Attention to detail:** Many autistic children notice things others might overlook.

Recognising these strengths is just as important as understanding the areas where your child may need extra support.



If you are concerned your child may be showing signs of autism, our team of experienced specialists can help. We provide educational psychologist assessments, autism diagnostic assessments, personalised advice, and practical strategies to support your child both at home and in school. Get in touch to start the conversation.

