



# What is Autism?

A helpful guide for primary school parents

## How is Autism defined?

### Biological definitions

-Autism is described as a **genetic neurodevelopmental condition**, which varies highly from individual to individual (Baron Cohen, 2019).

-It is said to be a developmental disorder because symptoms tend to appear within the **first two years** after birth. However diagnosis can occur **at any age** (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019)

-In addition to this, **'the theory of neurodiversity,'** considers autism to be a regular variant of the human brain (Lorenz and Heinitz, 2014)

### Diagnostic definition

-In order to be diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, children exhibit **social communication deficits** which manifest in **3 areas**:

1. Social emotional reciprocity
2. Non-verbal communicative, or restricted repetitive behaviours
3. Developing, maintaining and understand relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

### The autistic spectrum

Sometimes, autism is also called **'autistic spectrum disorder,'** or **'ASD.'** The term **'spectrum disorder'** is used, as there are significant variants in an individuals **experience** and **symptoms** (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019)

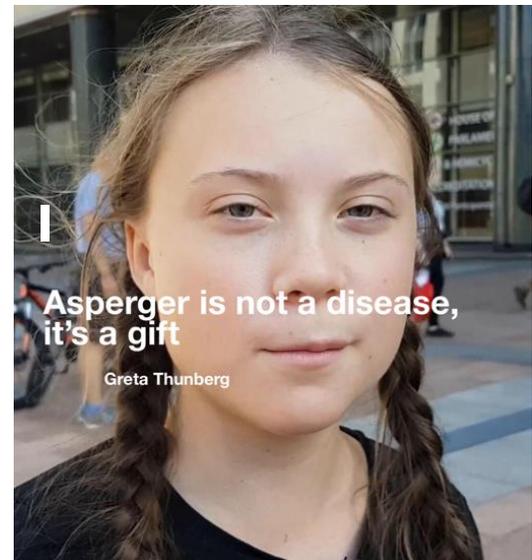
### What is the difference between Asperger's and Autism?

Asperger's differs to autism in various ways:

1. By definition, there are **no delays in communication** or language as with autistic children
2. **No cognitive delay**, as some autistic children may display intellectual disabilities
3. Those with Asperger's may want to have **social interaction** with others, however, find it difficult. This could be due to factors such as not understanding **gestures** or **social conventional rules** (Autism Society, 2019)

### What does the NHS say?

In line with the theory of neurodiversity, the NHS (2019) stress that autism should be viewed as a **difference** in brain function, rather than an **illness**



## DID YOU KNOW?



1.1% of the population in the UK may be on the autistic spectrum, that's over 695,000 people!



Autism affects 1 in 59 children



Boys are 4 times more likely to have autism than girls

(National Autism Association, 2019)

## Associated Strengths

Individuals with autism surpass **neurotypicals** in many areas of ability, e.g.:

1. The ability to **concentrate** for long periods of time
2. In processing **visual** information
3. Memory of **facts**
4. Identifying **logical rules** and **patterns**
5. Attention to detail, with deep narrow interests (Baron-Cohen, 2019)

## Associated Difficulties

Those with high functioning autism may struggle with deficits in social abilities, leading to **daily** difficulties **causing long-term negative outcomes** (Stitcher et al, 2011)

Children may experience delayed development in the 'Theory of Mind (ToM),' or 'mind blindness.' This refers to the ability to put oneself into another's shoes, understanding or imagining thoughts and feelings from a **different** persons point of view.

Due to delays in the development of ToM,, children may find other people's behaviours **unpredictable, confusing** and **potentially frightening** (Baron-Cohen et al 1995)

## Wider debates

### In professions...

Different media reports, interviews and biographies have shown people with Asperger's working in **professional fields**, e.g. in mechanics, research, or even electrical engineering. (Lorenz and Heinitz, 2014)

This is because they are **systematizers** rather than **empathizers**, meaning they work extremely well with non-human factors, such as computers (Armstrong, 2010)

One study found that in 387 **mathematics** undergraduates there were 7 cases of autism, compared to control students in other disciplines. It was concluded that there was a definite link between autism and systematizing (Wheelwright, Burtenshaw and Hobson, 2007)

### In wider society...

The **neurodiversity movement** celebrates autism as an inseparable aspect of identify (Kapp et al, 2013)

The movement focus's on neurodiversity awareness, and regards autism as a **positive identity** that needs no cure. This view suggests fundamental differences between the medical model and neurodiversity movement. Therefore, it is suggested autism is a **valid pathway** within human diversity, taking on a 'deficit-as-difference' conception. (Kapp et al, 2013).

### Traditional views

Traditionally, autism is viewed through a **biomedical** lens as a disorder or illness. However, the autistic community have challenged these notions, in line with the neurodiversity movement (Bagatell, 2010)

However, some argue that a cure for autism would be a **medical breakthrough**, as the disorder can be debilitating for some individuals. (Barnes and McCabe, 2011).

Sadly, in early psychology, many people who did not conform to social expectations would immediately become labelled as **medically disabled**. This led to the 'eugenic elimination', where people with conditions were viewed as 'defective,' and should be 'disposed of.' (Alexis Carell, 1935).



## Labelling (Woodcock, 2009)

### Difficulties for children

#### 1. Overgeneralization

Once a child is labelled, it is easy for parents and teachers to **over-generalize** and attribute all difficulties the child may be facing to the label. This can be damaging as it encourages adults to **forget** that children's behaviours can **fluctuate** depending on the situation they are in.

Furthermore, the importance of environmental factors can easily be forgotten.

#### 2. Prejudice

Labelling can also lead to **discrimination** and **prejudice**, through **over-simplifying** the behaviours we observe.

### Difficulties for the school

#### 1. Disempowering

Those who support children in school, i.e. teachers, can feel disempowered when trying to provide support. This is due to the fact that teachers are **rarely** involved in the diagnostic processes.

#### 2. Questioning ability

When diagnostic professionals are involved, teachers as '**non-specialists**' may begin to feel that there is little they can do to help, perhaps even making the problem **worse** by involving themselves.

### Strengths of labelling

1. More **timely** and **effective** services
2. Can help individuals and families feel like their difficulties are **adequate, less mysterious** and **acknowledged**
3. Increases **self esteem**
4. Labelled groups can develop a sense of **pride** and **belonging**, in line with the neurodiversity movement.

### How can an educational psychologist help?

#### 1. The unique role of an EP

EP's draw upon psychological theories and research that can be applied to the **unique difficulties** a child may be facing. These techniques will then develop **emotional, behavioral** and **social skills** in young people, fostering **psychological development**. (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2019)

#### 2. How they work

EP's will use four levels of practice. This includes working at the **individual, group, organizational** and **systemic** level.

This will begin at an **individual level**, where EP's carry out a psychological assessment concerning a child's difficulties. They will then draw upon complex problem solving technique's to support the child individual needs. At a **group level**, EP's may include support, interventions and work shops to children, as well as school staff and parents. At an **organizational level**, EP's will provide sufficient training on a psychological basis to staff members, as well as supporting the development of whole service strategies and systems as a **systemic level** (Achieving for children, 2019).

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