

# Autism Explainer

We know that there is a lot of misunderstanding about what autism is. That's why some autistic people, researchers and the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children (GOSH) Young Persons' Advisory Group (YPAG) for research have come together to answer young people's questions about autism.

## What about the person?



Adults in the autistic community prefer to be described as an **"autistic person"** (identity-first) rather than a **"person with autism"** (person-first). This is because they see autism as a core part of their identity. It's best to ask first when you start a conversation with an autistic person what their personal preference is. We will use identity-first language in this leaflet.



## What is autism?

Being autistic means that your **brain is wired differently** to other people. You may see and think about the world in a unique way. How a person's brain is wired cannot be changed.



We asked autistic young people what they wanted people to know about them:

"Autism is one slice of who I am. I think I'm more than just autistic."  
– Eli, 11 years old

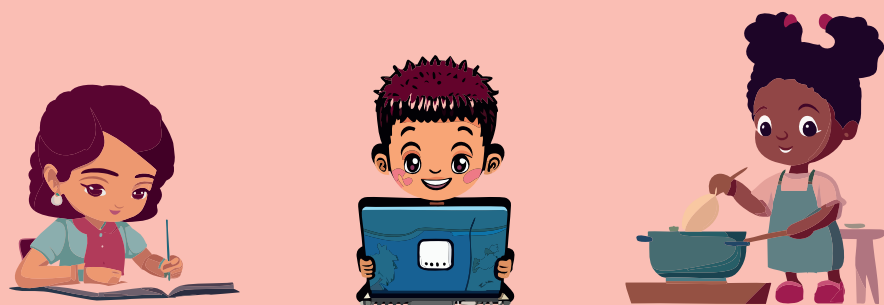
"I'm kind and rich. I love Lego and Star Wars. I'm really creative – I'm good at drawing and like making things"  
– Jack, 13 years

## If there are many types of autism, is everyone technically autistic?

Autism is on a spectrum. Some people who don't have autism can have things in common with those who do, but this does not mean that they have autism.

## Can you cure autism?

Because autism isn't a disease, it doesn't need to be cured. **Being autistic is part of who a person is**, like their eye colour. Autism comes with strengths and support needs, most of which can be managed with the right help. With support autistic people can thrive.



## Does autism often go undiagnosed – what about this thing called 'masking'?

Masking is when someone acts differently to fit in. People describe this like acting, **"wearing a mask"** or trying to **"act normal"**. Everyone masks in certain situations; job interviews are a good example of this.

Autistic people can start masking at a very early age. **Those who mask say it can be very tiring and it takes a toll on their mental health.** When people mask really well this means their autism can go un-noticed.

Masking might mean people do things like:

- Watch how other people act with their friends and copy them.
- Hug or shake hands, even though they don't enjoy it.



## Are there common signs of autism?

**Although no two autistic people are the same, they share some similarities.** Autistic people often:

- Like order and routines. They can get quite upset when plans change unexpectedly without warning.
- Find it uncomfortable making friends, even when they want friends. Some autistic people find it hard to understand social cues such as body language or what facial expressions might mean.
- Have a special interest which they enjoy learning and talking about. They may be so passionate about their interest that they want to talk about it all the time.
- Can be more sensitive to sounds, smells and touch than other people.
- Are very honest and say what they really think.
- Have really good attention to detail.
- Are good at keeping promises.



## Can autism get better or worse?

Autism doesn't get better or worse, but autistic people's ability to cope can vary depending on the situation. Some autistic people develop strategies and skills to do this on their own and some need support.



Some autistic people are more sensitive to specific sounds, smells and textures than is usual. When this happens, they can feel overwhelmed.

**To help autistic people to feel more comfortable, changes are sometimes needed to make places more welcoming.** For example, 'relaxed' performances at the cinema have lower sounds and keep the lights on.

## How do you find out if you're autistic?

Most people find out they are autistic by seeing a doctor in childhood. **Only specially trained doctors can diagnose autism.**

The doctor will ask the parents/carers about how their child changed as they grew up. The doctors will also watch the child play.



## Is autism a mental health condition?

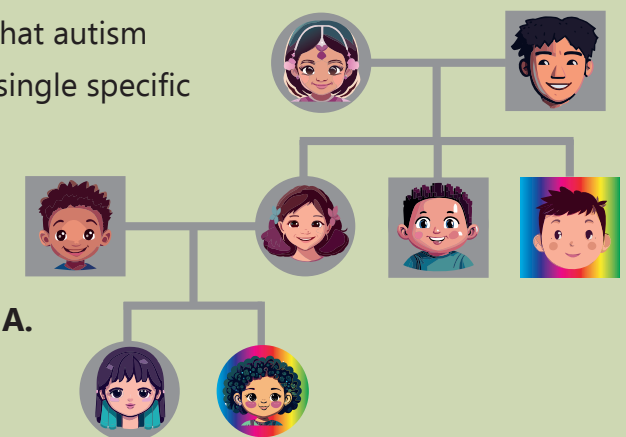
Autism is not a mental health condition, but it is very common for autistic people to have conditions such as anxiety or depression.



## Can autism be passed down genetically?

Autism can run in families. However, because autism is such a complex condition, it is also genetically complex. This means that autism cannot be linked to a single specific genetic change.

**There is no such thing as an autism "gene" or autism DNA.**



# What next?

Often, people only focus on the negative aspects of autism. We hope that this leaflet has helped you to understand that every autistic person is unique and has individual skills and talents.

If you would like to find out more about autism, we recommend getting in touch with:



[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)



[www.autistica.org.uk](http://www.autistica.org.uk)

This leaflet is made available under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license and we encourage you to share it with others.

It was co-produced by VJ Appleton, Eli Coughlan, Adam Schifferes, Deirdre Leyden, Nancy Beddall, Harriet Housby, Prof David Skuse, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children (GOSH) Young Persons' Advisory Group (YPAG) for research, Autistica Insight Group & Dr Jeanne Wolstencroft.

