

# CHAPTER SIX B

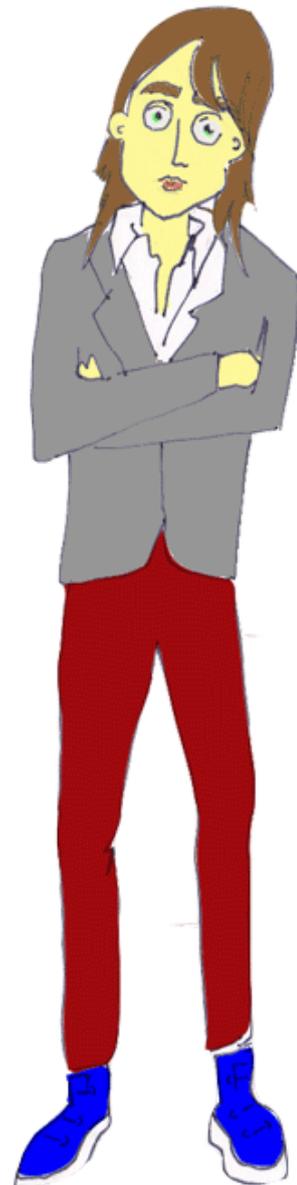
## Working with Autistic Young People

### Introduction

This section focuses on autism. It explains the needs that Autistic young people may face and offers practical advice on supporting their engagement in youth groups. It concludes by directing you to the organisations and resources that can support you in your work with Autistic young people.

Autistic young people are a diverse population, and every Autistic person has their own unique experience of being autistic. While we address common themes pertaining to autism in this resource, it is essential to remember that there is no 'one size fits all' model for supporting Autistic young people.

Autism is a complex lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that effects how a person experiences, perceives, processes, understands and interacts with the world around them in a way that differs from neurotypical people.



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For many Autistic young people, structured opportunities to socialise, make friends and pursue interests, such as youth work, are invaluable. However, all too often, loneliness and social isolation are a norm for many Autistic young people because of barriers they face that prevent them from engaging in out of school activities.

Youth workers can do a lot to remove or allay these barriers by deepening their understanding of autism and creating environments that support communication, connection, and building of empathy amongst all the young people in the youth group. Key to this is spending time getting to know each young person to be able to offer and co-create the best support structure. Trial and error are part of the process, along with patience, resilience, persistence and confidence in your ability as a youth worker.



In the Republic of Ireland under the **Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004**, it is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their disability in the provision of goods and services, education, sports, access to public facilities accommodation and employment. Autism comes under the disability ground in the legislation.

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## Demographics

An NCSE (National Council for Special Education) report stated that one in sixty-five school children have an autism diagnosis, that is 1.5% of the school population. Autism can affect anyone regardless of class, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.<sup>i</sup>

### Gender

Autism diagnoses are statistically more common in males, but increased understanding of autism in recent years has seen more females being diagnosed<sup>ii</sup>. Diagnosis in girls may be delayed because:

- Girls' special interests often align with those of their peers,
- Girls develop spoken and non-verbal communication skills earlier than boys and in general have a better command over these skills,
- Many girls learn to mask or camouflage certain autistic features, especially in public.



Masking techniques involve “mimicking their neurotypical peers, watching from the side-lines and using their intellect to figure out ways to go undetected. They study, learn ways, and practice taking neurotypical approaches to social situations.”<sup>iii</sup> While many Autistic people feel pressure to fit in and they do this through masking it has significant drawbacks. Living life under a mask can be extremely exhausting, it creates barriers to making authentic connections, and often leads to poor mental health such as anxiety and depression.<sup>iv</sup> Research suggests it is one of biggest factors in the high numbers of suicide, attempted suicide and suicidal ideation in the Autistic population.<sup>v</sup>

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## Mortality

UK research reports higher rates of suicide for Autistic people, which they link to increased levels of depression.<sup>vi</sup> Swedish research, quoted by AUsome Ireland in 2020, shows Autistic people having an average life expectancy of 54 years and a suicide rate nine times greater than the general population.<sup>vii</sup> AUsome Ireland link these stats to the exclusion, oppression and discrimination that Autistic people face.

## Gender identity

Autistic young people are more likely to experience differences in how they conceptualise gender than the general population. Correspondingly, a significant percentage of Autistic people identify as transgender or non-binary.



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## Terminology

Many people prefer to be referred to as an ‘Autistic person’, and increasingly use a capital A for Autistic. This is an example of identity-first language. (i.e., autism is not something I ‘have’, it is what I am, it is how I identify. For example, we don't ‘have’ Irishness, we *are* Irish). We use identity-first terminology and the capital A format in this resource.

An Autistic person may also use the term ‘neurodivergent’\* for themselves and describe those who are not neurodivergent as ‘neurotypical.’

\* Note: Neurodivergence also includes ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Bipolarism etc.

However, some may prefer the term ‘a person with autism’ which is seen as adopting a person-first approach.

Pay close attention to the terms used by the young person when speaking about autism and then use their own preferred terminology. If you are unsure of what terms to use – just ask. This shows you are interested in getting it right and ensuring that you are using the terminology that the young person is most comfortable with. If in any doubt, use identity first language – Autistic person.

It is important also to use the right language when describing support needs that an Autistic person may require, and to be mindful that in different contexts these can change. In the past, and still used in some medical settings, language has been used to describe



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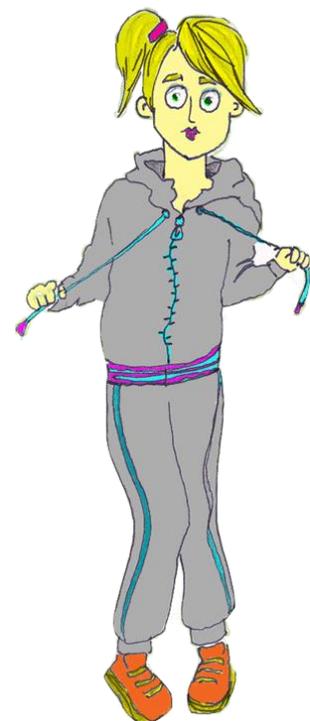
autism that members of the Autistic community find offensive. For example, many Autistic people find the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) disempowering, as the words ‘disorder’ or ‘condition’ imply that there is something innately wrong with being autistic. Autistic people also say that it is important not to separate autism by different presentations. For example, using the terms high functioning or low functioning create negative stereotypes and build false assumptions about what to expect from someone rather than building understanding and awareness. In this respect, it is important to know that the term Aspergers has been removed from diagnostic manuals.

## Understanding autism and key terms

Autism is a **neurodevelopmental difference**; this means that an Autistic person’s brain develops differently. Autism is present from birth and can be **diagnosed** from infancy. However, it is quite often diagnosed later in life, during a person’s school years, adolescence or even in adulthood.

The most effective way to describe autism is as a **difference** – and that difference is not something to be feared or viewed as less than but rather as something to be accommodated, embraced, and celebrated.

We all **interpret** the world around us through our senses. How we interact with our physical surroundings and the people we meet every day is based on the information our brain receives from these senses. Autistic individuals **perceive senses** differently from neurotypical people and this informs the different way an Autistic person will **interact** with their surroundings.



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In addition, many Autistic people can be **hypersensitive** or **hyposensitive** to sensory stimuli. A noise which seems to be medium volume to a neurotypical person may be intensely loud and intolerable for someone who is hypersensitive to sound. Equally, a hyposensitive person may enjoy higher levels of sensory information which a neurotypical person might perceive as being too intense, such as strong tastes or heavy clothing. We describe this in more detail later.

## The Double Empathy Problem

Key to understanding autism is realising that issues with social interaction come from the **interaction** space between neurodivergent and neurotypical people and should not be seen as resting solely with the Autistic individual. Barriers emerge when there is a mismatch between what neurotypical and Autistic people see as important in terms of social norms, communication styles, displays of emotion, experiences and sense of the world, how relationships are formed etc. Autistic people and neurotypical people do these things differently and value them in different ways. It is these differences that make it challenging for each group to understand and connect with each other. The social issues Autistic people experience when trying to connect with neurotypical people are also the issues experienced by neurotypical people trying to connect with Autistic people. This makes it a double problem, equally experienced by two different groups of people. This is known as the **double empathy problem**<sup>viii</sup>.



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## Needs of Autistic Young People

Youth workers who work with Autistic young people stress that each Autistic young person is unique and may need a different approach. They have, however, identified the following key commonly occurring needs:

### On creating the right space

- Many Autistic young people benefit from structure and clear plans and tend to thrive in predictable environments. They can struggle in less certain or changeable environments. Youth work's non-formal approach, which relies on flexibility and process-oriented work, may be perceived as unstructured and unpredictable to Autistic young people, so adaptations need to be made to provide more predictability.<sup>ix</sup>
- Some Autistic young people need support in getting to know the other young people in the youth group. (Autistic young people may attend school outside of their community and therefore not know other young people in their neighbourhood.)
- Autistic people tend to need more time and support to familiarise themselves with and become comfortable in new environments.
- Autistic young people may need support to feel comfortable to communicate their authentic selves and express their true emotions.
- Autistic young people often have triggers; they may need support to express what these are, to manage them when they occur, and to know that youth workers will do what they can to prevent them occurring
  - ✓ For example, "environmental" factors can distress someone with sensory differences, e.g. overpowering smells (disinfectant, perfume, etc.), noises (e.g. alarm going off unexpectedly), colours, and handling certain textures.

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### Meeting other specific needs

- A significant percentage of Autistic young people are transgender or non-binary and they require additional support on the additional needs this raises for them
- Some medical services can deny services based on an autism diagnosis - youth workers have reported that CAMHS would not see Autistic young people as they see their diagnosis as separate and disconnected to mental health services

### Needs of parents/guardians

Youth workers who work with Autistic young people also work closely with their parents and guardians. They note that parents may not disclose their child's diagnosis, or they may not work in tandem with the youth worker (or school) to develop joint strategies or interventions with the young person. They describe the following parental needs:

- They may have not yet come to terms with their child's diagnosis
- They find it difficult to communicate their child's needs as they are unsure of what support they can request of youth workers or youth leaders
- They have had previous experience of their child being judged or excluded when they have previously disclosed their autism diagnosis
- They may be autistic or have additional needs themselves



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## Building new understandings about autism

It is critical that autism is understood differently from the way it has been seen in the past. Key to this is recognising that a neurotypical lens and approach to working with Autistic young people can inadvertently discriminate and exclude them. Instead, Autistic young people need a strengths-based approach, which involves seeing and focusing on the strengths of a young person and not on the challenges they experience and present. It asks youth workers to be aware of their language, their assumptions, and the physical spaces they create. Adapting to meet Autistic young people's needs involves being aware of three key areas of divergence experienced by Autistic young people.

### Key areas of difference

Three key areas which an Autistic person will experience differently from neurotypical people are:

1. Sensory perception and processing
2. Communication
3. Social interaction

The following explains some common needs for Autistic young people around these key areas.

However, it is important to remember that no two Autistic people will have the same set of needs; when you have met one Autistic person you have met one Autistic person.



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## 1 Sensory perception

Autism affects the way a person perceives the world and this is influenced by their eight senses:

1. Visual,
2. Auditory,
3. Tactile,
4. Smell,
5. Taste,
6. Proprioception (body awareness, body control and spatial awareness),
7. Vestibular (balance and movement)
8. Interoception (feeling and understanding what's going on inside your body).



Importantly, Autistic people perceive all the details of the experience, without explaining away parts of the experience through their thoughts.

### Sensory Sensitivity

Some Autistic people may experience pain, distress or discomfort from sensory information to one or more of their eight senses – this is known as **hypersensitivity**. Levels of hypersensitivity can vary from person to person and can also change depending on time, mood, energy and context.

Conversely, some Autistic people may be **hyposensitive**. This means that they may need more stimulation from one or more of the eight senses to experience and understand it. Similar to hypersensitivity, levels of hyposensitivity can vary from person to person and can also vary in different contexts for the person. Hyposensitivity can also cause discomfort/pain and irritation.

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It is important to note that quite often an Autistic person will not be either hypersensitive or hyposensitive in all senses. It is more common for a person to experience a mix of sensory sensitivities to varying degrees. Autistic people can also experience hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity simultaneously. For example, an Autistic person might find soft touch such as a gentle pat on the shoulder to be painful or uncomfortable but at the same time they may seek out deep pressure bear hugs.

Autistic individuals can also be **sensory seeking** which is when they crave and enjoy particular sensory experiences.

**See examples below of behaviours and experiences that relate to hypersensitivity, hyposensitivity, and sensory seeking in all eight senses:**

Sensory Experience	Hypersensitive	Hyposensitive	Sensory seeking
<b>TOUCH</b> 	Light touch may feel like a hard punch, electric shock, or painful.	May walk into things or other people and get bruises without realising.	May crave deep pressure. May seek out bear hugs or want to touch objects or use tactile fidget toys when concentrating.
<b>SMELL</b> 	Smells can be overpowering and cause headaches, nausea or a gag response; food and perfume smells especially.	May not notice smells at all.	May seek out and immensely enjoy certain smells such as coffee, or cooking aromas; earthy smells such as fresh cut grass or the smell of rain
<b>VISUAL</b> 	Lights can be dazzling, overpowering, and disorienting, especially if its fluorescent or unnatural lighting.	Lighting can be much too dim, and they may need extra light to see	May seek out visual stimulus such as bubble tubes, neon or sparkly lights, or colourful cuisine.

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<p><b>SOUNDS</b></p> 	<p>Sounds may be experienced as painful or feel like having toothpicks jammed in your ears. Background or remote sounds may build up and overwhelm the person.</p>	<p>May need higher volumes of sound.</p>	<p>May seek out loud sounds that they can control such as having music in headphones. Or they may make stimulating sounds. (See stimulating on pg. 15)</p>
<p><b>TASTE</b></p> 	<p>Some tastes may be unpleasant and cause a gag reaction. Some tastes may be overpowering or feel uncomfortable to eat.</p>	<p>Food may taste bland and boring.</p>	<p>May seek out stronger/ sweeter tastes, such as spicy food, sour sweets, or they may chew on objects.</p>
<p><b>PROPRIO-CEPTION</b> (body awareness and movement, control and spatial awareness)</p> 	<p>May want to avoid any activity such as running, or activities that involve precise fine motor skills such as building lego or closing and opening buttons.</p> <p>May feel pain and have longer after affects from physical exertion.</p> <p>May find standing for long to be exhausting.</p> <p>May seem stiff or slow in their movements.</p>	<p>May have difficulty recognising where their body is in space and sit closer to people than others are comfortable with.</p> <p>May lean against walls or other people. May slam doors or drop objects. May have difficulty with upright posture or may find it hard to keep their head up.</p>	<p>May seek and find pleasure in bashing into things, crashing, stomping, slapping or clapping. May seek out activities that involve pressure and movement such as playing the drums, swimming dancing, basketball or weight training.</p>

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<p><b>VESTI-BULAR</b> (Balance and movement)</p> 	<p>May fear dizziness, disorientation or falling from a height.</p> <p>May dislike sports, or activities where they have their feet off the ground.</p> <p>May get nauseous when traveling in vehicles.</p>	<p>May be able to spin in circles and appear never to get dizzy.</p> <p>May find it difficult to watch moving objects such as cars.</p>	<p>May seek out activities where they can be upside-down. May be a risk taker, enjoy heights or going high on a swing or trampoline. May enjoy swinging back on a chair. May be a thrill seeker and enjoy rollercoasters. May like to rock when standing or sitting.</p>
<p><b>INTERO-CEPTION</b> (awareness of the body and feelings)</p> 	<p>May be overwhelmed by feelings connected to day-to-day body functions and not be able to isolate or interpret sensations.</p> <p>May feel they are in pain.</p> <p>Misinterpretation of their feelings may cause stress or anxiety.</p> <p>They may notice bodily sensations more, such as the sound of their heartbeat or rhythm of their breathing and this can be distracting or distressing.</p> <p>May eat more because feeling hungry may be irritating or uncomfortable.</p>	<p>May find it difficult to tell how they are feeling, either physically or emotionally.</p> <p>May find it difficult to connect to bodily sensations such as linking butterflies in the tummy to feelings of anxiety.</p> <p>May not be able to answer questions relating to their body.</p> <p>May find it difficult to notice, recognise or describe bodily sensations or messages from their senses; for</p>	<p>May move more because they like the feeling of fast breathing.</p> <p>May be dehydrated or eat less as they may seek out and enjoy feeling thirsty or hungry.</p>

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	May use the bathroom more because they dislike the feeling of a full bladder.	example they may get headaches because they find it difficult recognise when they are hungry, thirsty or when they need to use the toilet.	
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For more on the 8 senses and how they impact a young person see these short video clips <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeKeHFDTcDWRg8ITtIbc-qCc5LgQhwpND>

### **Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour)**

Stimming is a series of repetitive actions or vocalisations which help a person regulate the body's sensory system. It is something everyone does to some degree. We might crack our knuckles, tap our feet, play with a pen, or hum and whistle. Autistic people can be more overt when they stim or they may stim more often. Flapping their hands, toe walking, touching the same texture, rocking back and forth and repeating certain noises or words are just some of the ways that stimming can help Autistic people regulate their sensory system and foster well-being. It has the effect of reducing uncertainty and giving controlled proprioceptive feedback that is calming for the person. Stimming is a natural form of autistic expression. Autistic people may stim at any stage, when they are excited, happy, overloaded, or in distress.



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Many Autistic young people will have learnt to self-regulate through stimming but they need to be afforded the space, by a calm youth leader, to do so in their preferred manner; to step out, or to move, or to talk etc.

## Sensory overload

Sensory overload occurs when an Autistic person's brain has received more sensory information than it is able to process at one time. Because Autistic people perceive all the information coming from the environment, and therefore try to process it all, it can lead to sensory overload. This can cause a person to experience stress, anxiety and even physical pain.

This can result in an uncontrollable behavioural response, such as social withdrawal, temporarily becoming non-speaking, freeze reaction (like a rabbit caught in headlights), becoming very agitated/upset or having a meltdown or shutdown. Sometimes the reaction will be quite subtle and you may not notice but the young person might feel like they are imploding inside.



## Meltdown

In a meltdown the young person may temporarily lose control of their behaviour and often become emotional. This loss of control can be expressed verbally, physically or both. In some situations, a meltdown might cause an Autistic person to completely shut-down. This may result in the person being unable to move, speak or interact with their surroundings. It is important to remember that whatever behaviours are occurring during a meltdown, the person is not in control and is not choosing their behaviour. There is nothing

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anyone can do to stop a meltdown once it has begun, all we can do is make sure the person is safe and comfortable until it passes. Sometimes stimming can help an Autistic person self-regulate when they have sensory overload. It is important not to prevent this behaviour unless it is physically dangerous for the person.

### Common sensory triggers in a youth work setting

Most Autistic people will experience sensory sensitivities to some degree, however no two Autistic people will experience the same sensory profile.

That said, here are some common

sensory triggers that have been noted in youth work settings:

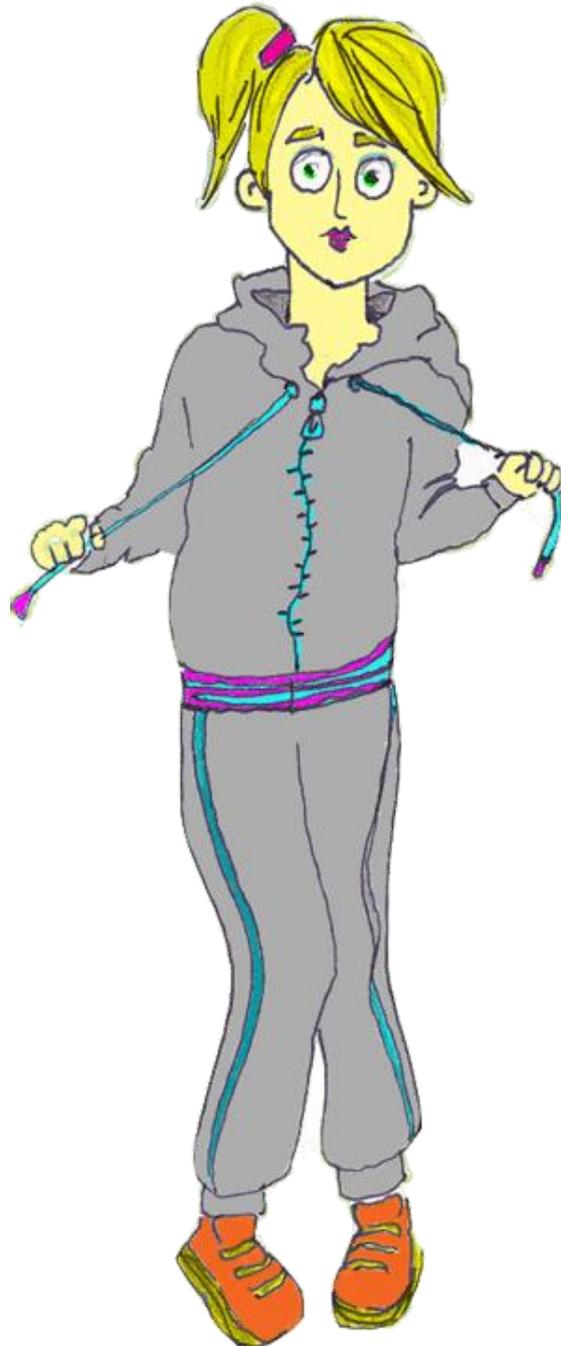
- **Movement** - When the young people are asked to move around in the space as part of a group activity or game it can be disorienting for an Autistic person. There are a number of reasons for this, it could be related to the person's sense of sight and how they process moving objects, or their sense of proprioception (their ability to judge their spatial awareness). It could also be related to anxiety; they may not cope well if they are unsure of where everyone is going to end up when the movement stops.
- **Stillness** - Maintaining stillness for a sustained period of time may be challenging for an Autistic person. If they are hypersensitive, they may need to self-regulate through stimming or to distract themselves from sensory triggers in the environment. If they are



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hyposensitive, they may need a lot of movement to experience sensory input. If they experience proprioceptive or vestibular differences, they may feel pain or discomfort from holding their body in one position for too long.

- **Noise** - Noise that builds up over time or is too intense can cause an Autistic person to experience sensory overload. Sudden noise can cause a stress response. Background noise can make it very difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. Some Autistic people will need louder sound stimulation than others or may need to make sounds to concentrate or self-regulate.
- **Suddenness** – Sometimes it is the unexpected nature of sudden noises or other sudden change that can affect an Autistic person. Autistic people may engage in repetitive actions or hyper-focus on passions to regain a sense of control in unpredictable situations.



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## 2 Communication

Communication is the way in which we give, receive, and interpret information. The following sets out some of the communication needs to consider when working with an Autistic young person.

### Language

Autistic people are often very direct and literal when communicating. For many, slang, metaphors, sarcasm and abstract language are difficult to understand, and may be confusing or sound funny. We often don't realise how much neurotypical people use metaphors, idioms, and turns of phrases that when taken literally have very different meanings to the words they use.

### From sensory perception to information processing

The way in which an autistic brain develops causes it to pick up on all the sensory information and uncertainty that exists in an environment, and this is used to understand and learn about the world. This means that an Autistic person will perceive more of what is out there; what is in the background is often processed as much as what is in the foreground, both are seen as equally relevant. This is known as gestalt perception, they see the whole picture in all its details, and any changes to the whole picture, even if it is a tiny change, means that the whole picture needs to be processed all over again as a new distinct picture. This can make it quite difficult to focus on one particular element, such as a conversation or a question being asked. In contrast

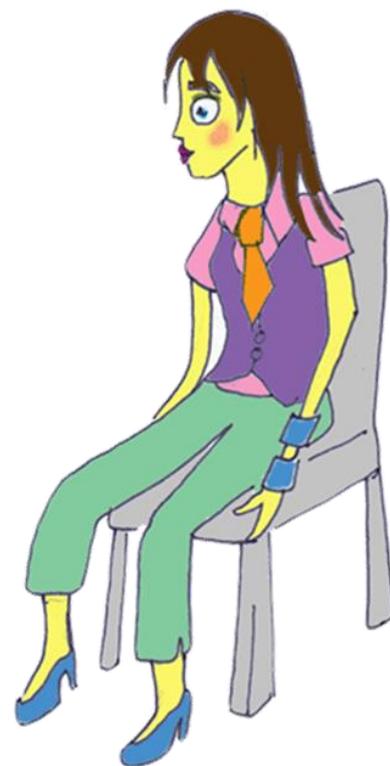


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the neurotypical person tends to see the whole picture in a more generalized way with less details and they can usually ignore small changes. Perceiving greater amounts of environmental sensory stimulus in more unpredictable environments (such as busy neurotypically designed environments) means there can be a lot of surprises and changes for the Autistic person to process. Because of this, it may take an Autistic person a longer time to respond to a question or interaction than others. This is not because an Autistic person is slower but just that they are processing more. A neurotypical person will need to process less and may also use past experiences to predict what is coming next, to manage uncertainties and adapt more easily to change. An Autistic person will rely more on current sensory information to make sense of the world.

This can all result in a “road block” at the junction between perception and processing which can lead to the autistic brain adapting coping strategies such as fragmented perception, where the Autistic individual starts to perceive the world in pieces, seeing individual hands, eye movement, limb movements lights etc. but without the full picture. However, this can also increase distress and sensory overload and can lead to shutdown.

An Autistic person may also experience delayed processing, where they may be able to repeat back what is said to them, but they may not fully process the meaning of it till later and may not be able to respond until they have done this.



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They may also experience distorted perception; for them it may feel like time is moving slower or faster, or distance or depth may look different, they may feel dizzy or become uncoordinated.

Processing information demands attention which is a limited resource for all people. An Autistic person engages in cognitive strategies to deal with information that need to be processed. Engaging in Monotropism is one such cognitive strategy. Monotropism is when a person brings tunnel vision to something specific, such as a select interest or interests. They are still processing in detail but only on one or a few specific interests at the exclusion of everything else. This monotropic hyper-focus can be immensely enjoyable and calming or alerting for an Autistic individual. It also functions to help the Autistic person self-regulate and creates a good framework for learning. However, when it comes to switching tasks or being interrupted and pulled from that hyper-focus flow, or state, it can be difficult and even painful. Because Autistic people have gestalt perception – i.e. when they focus in on specific interests they are still processing the whole picture in all its details - when they are pulled from a hyperfocus state to another task it means the whole picture changes again and the Autistic person has to start processing an entire new situation along with all its details.<sup>x</sup>



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## Social communication

A conversation between two people involves more aspects than one person speaking and another listening and responding. Communication also includes facial expressions, pitch or tone of voice, hand gestures and body language which tell us a lot about what the other person really means. Understanding these can be tough for an Autistic person communicating with a neurotypical person. Equally, neurotypical people can find it difficult to understand autistic body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. This is an example of the double empathy challenge.

## Speech

Autistic people have a different developmental trajectory and develop diverse ways of communicating; some Autistic people will not use speech as their primary means of communication but may use other methods to communicate such as using technology and picture tools. It is important to understand that just because someone can't speak, it doesn't mean that their style of communicating is any less valid or that they don't have anything to contribute.



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### 3 Social interaction

Social interaction is the way in which we understand social rules, behaviours and relationships. A person who struggles with neurotypical social interaction may experience the following challenges in neurotypical-dominant social situations:

- May find turn-taking in conversations difficult
- May not ask questions or respond at the neurotypically appropriate time
- May have a different awareness of personal space or boundaries
- May only engage in conversation about topics which are of interest to them
- May have different expectations about what is socially appropriate such as the need to make eye contact or engage in small talk

This often means that an Autistic person will find it hard to make neurotypical friends or feel a sense of belonging within a group of neurotypical people. A lack of understanding and support around social interaction contributes to many Autistic people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, and thus dropping out of activities that prioritise or insist on neurotypical social interactions.

**"Explain things to us, especially when rules and practice differ. We can worry a lot about things that are unclear."**

#### Engaging in Social Activities

Accurately interpreting neurotypical social situations is challenging for many Autistic people. Understanding a new environment can take time for an Autistic person to fully adjust to. Being unaware and uncertain of neurotypical

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social norms and customs within settings, including youth groups, can result in:

- Apprehension around visiting new places
- Nervousness to try new things
- Struggling to predict what is likely to happen in new situations from previous experiences
- Difficulty coping with a sudden change in routine
- Avoiding situations or activities that are not familiar and predictable
- Preferring to copy or repeat familiar routines. [This creates controlled predictable feedback which reduces surprise and calms the individual. It is also the way an Autistic person learns about the world, by playing and exploring and experiencing something in a new way over and over.]

## Anxiety

Communication, self-awareness, social skills, abstract thinking, problem solving and developing perspective are some of the skills we develop to cope with the day-to-day anxiety. However, neurotypical and Autistic people can develop these skills differently and may respond to anxiety in different ways.

Common anxiety triggers that impact some Autistic young people include dealing with challenges linked to double empathy such as:

- Social demands
- Communication difficulties

And issues connected to unpredictability, such as:

- New experiences
- Unexpected changes
- Speaking in front of/to others
- Fear of judgement/ridicule

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**Signs of anxiety may include:**

- Easily losing patience or temper
- Restlessness
- Increased level of stimming behaviours or other behaviours communicating distress
- Increased fear, hyper-arousal, or irritability
- Fatigue
- Extreme avoidance of - or withdrawing from - people, places and/or situations
- Demand avoidance anxiety, this is when some Autistic individuals feel the world is so out of their control that even a simple demand or praise can feel like someone is trying to take control away from them and they can react negatively to this.
- Increased masking or camouflaging behaviour
- Shyness
- Distressing thoughts
- Somatic complaints, such as stomach aches, muscle aches, headaches or generally feeling unwell
- Repetitively looking for reassurance

**Parental fear/anxiety**

In some cases, parents may have fears or anxiety for their child about joining a social group. Parents may have experienced their child being pre-judged, teased or bullied due to bias and discrimination about their differences. It can be hard for them to trust youth workers and young people they do not know. Youth workers can allay parent's fears by letting them know they understand and will support their child and communicate with them if anything comes up during the group time that they need to know.

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## Disclosing autism and additional needs

An Autistic young person will experience a range of different needs around the key areas of Sensory perception and processing, communication, and social interaction. In addition, they may have needs around motor skills, body control and spatial awareness. Some may have needs around gender identity and sexual orientation. For a youth worker, it is helpful to have prior knowledge of these needs to plan activities and supports accordingly. However, it is also a parent's or young person's right not to disclose personal information and they may withhold this information for a number of reasons, such as:

- A parent(s) may not yet be at a stage where they are comfortable disclosing this information
- They may be aware of their child's needs but may not yet have begun a formal diagnostic process, or they may be experiencing difficulties with accessing a formal diagnosis and subsequently find it difficult to describe their child's needs in a way that might be understood by the youth worker.
- They may be aware of their child's needs and still coming to terms with a diagnosis
- They may not fully understand or feel confident explaining their child's needs
- They may feel uncomfortable writing down such potentially sensitive information on a form, without full knowledge of who has access to that form
- They may be uncomfortable disclosing sensitive information when they



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do not know how the youth worker will approach neurodivergences

- A young person may not be aware of any formal diagnosis/ additional needs themselves as the parent(s) may have chosen not to share this information with them

The next section outlines ways of working with Autistic young people, and their parents, where relevant, to meet their needs and support their engagement in your youth groups.



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# Developing inclusive practice - working with Autistic young people

Youth workers have given the following advice on working with Autistic young people:

## Settling in

- Autistic young people may need time to feel comfortable in a space; introduce them to new spaces in the building when they are ready
- Autistic young people often prefer to attend autistic-only youth groups before venturing into integrated spaces in the youth centre
- Give appropriate levels of responsibility while consulting young people on activities etc. and work toward a co-design model
- Offer a range of activities. Do not assume that certain activities will not be of interest to Autistic young people.
- Young people who attend school outside of their community might not know the young people attending your youth group - help them to forge connections and relationships
- Running a group on Friday nights gave young people something to look forward to at the weekend and something to talk about in school on Monday morning which helped them connect socially.

## Communication

- Autistic young people may have difficulty with neurotypical style "small talk"; they may take things literally and may find it difficult to understand subtlety, irony or innuendo and other aspects of neurotypical culture. Delegating specific tasks (such as having a checklist to tick off, checking what people want to eat, what people's favourite films are, etc.) or letting Autistic people connect in their own way can be a helpful way of supporting Autistic young people to adapt to the neurotypical social environment.

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- Educate the youth group about neurodiversity to help begin building double empathy between young people
- Enable the young people to feel comfortable about communicating
  - ✓ One youth service invited their young people to write open letters on the impact of being involved in the youth group
- Enable young people to express their emotions

### **Sensory processing**

- Manage sensory overload by ensuring there is a balanced sensory environment, such as:
  - ✓ Reducing overpowering smells (disinfectant, perfume, etc.), reducing unpredictable or loud noises (e.g. alarm going off unexpectedly),
  - ✓ Include pastel colours and soft or natural light
  - ✓ Reduce florescent or flickering lights.
  - ✓ Include textures that the young person can touch (plants, soft furnishing, tactile sensory aids) and reduce the need for them to touch uncomfortable surfaces (scratchy carpets or too hot or too cold temperatures.)
  - ✓ Design an environment that can be adapted and controlled by the Autistic young person.
  - ✓ Have a designated sensory area with controllable lighting, sound and movement or even a sensory toolbox with coloured sensory lights, weight blanket, stress balls, yoga mat, sunglasses, headphones or subtle scents an Autistic young person can choose from to help them manage the sensory environment. [See more details on the Table on page 36.]
- Some youth workers report that they no longer wear perfume or use perfumed products
- An audit of the youth space by an autistic support service can help you identify possible triggers and how you can best adapt your space,
- Provide a quiet space that young people can go to when they need to

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withdraw

- Run workshops on how different people can experience and react to the sensory environment to build awareness and perspective for all young people.
  - ✓ Run an activity where everyone in the group fills out their sensory profile and learns how everyone has different sensory processing patterns and ways of perceiving and interacting with the sensory environment. This can be a fun awareness-raising workshop for everyone that doesn't set the Autistic young person apart; it shows how we all have sensory needs, even if we are not aware of them.
- Work with the young people to enable understanding of sensory triggers, and together decide how best to manage them

### **Building your own capacity as youth workers**

- To manage the diversity of needs Autistic young people may present it is helpful to bring in more support:
  - ✓ One youth service brought in youth work students to work with their Autistic youth groups
  - ✓ A junior youth leadership programme being held within the wider youth service provided additional support to an Autistic youth group as part of their learning journey
- Develop and nurture relationships with specialised groups such as Aspire, the National Learning Network (Rehab), ASIAm, Arch Clubs, Sensational Kids, and BeLonG To
  - ✓ Aspire support young people to take part in work experience opportunities
  - ✓ BeLonG To can offer support in relation to Autistic young people who are transgender or non-binary
- Develop interagency approaches to address the needs of Autistic young people
- Build connections with schools to enable referrals and to support

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transitions

- Developing a parent support group has been very helpful for one youth service who consistently and in tandem, work on the same strategies at home and in the youth work environment

### **Most importantly**

- Embrace the learning opportunities to develop mutual understanding and greater awareness of the Autistic experience and build connections between young people

The following outlines in more detail how you can support Autistic young people in the three key areas of:

1. Sensory perception and processing
2. Communication
3. Social interaction

## **1 Managing and supporting young people around sensory perception and processing**

### **Noise and unpredictability**

Observe the needs of the young people in the group in relation to noise and adapt your practice accordingly. It can be helpful to try:

- Use a noise-o-meter to help control noise in the room
- Allow the young person to wear ear buds or ear defenders so that they can participate to the best of their ability
- When it is possible, warn the young person that the next activity will be loud or that a loud/sudden sound is coming
  - ✓ Have a quiet area that the young person can retreat to when a loud sensory environment becomes too much.

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- Be mindful of changes in your tone of voice and be aware that an Autistic young person may be more likely to pick up and react to tone changes when you are stressed or annoyed.
- Manage suddenness by:
  - ✓ Providing a friendly calm warning to the person before a sudden change, event or trigger
  - ✓ Use countdowns or have a visual signal to ease anxiety around suddenness or unpredictable change.
- Respect the autistic experience and create an inclusive accepting environment for the Autistic person to be autistic and engage in autistic expression, communication and stimming.

## Movement

If a young person becomes disorientated when moving around in a space during an activity or game it can be helpful to try:

- Building the pace of movement slowly
- Giving instructions on the direction of movement
- Adding any new instructions by building them up into layers of complexity.
- If the young person cannot or does not want to follow the movement let them move in their own way.

## Stillness

If your activity involves asking the young people to be still and any of the young people are challenged by this, it can be helpful to try:

- First, ask yourself what level of stillness is absolutely necessary in the activity, can the young people use a fidget toy, or pace, or stim



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- to self-regulate, while staying relatively still,
- If, for example, the stillness is part of a drama activity, use a visual aid (such as a sand timer) to countdown the amount of time they need to be still for,
  - Use physical supports such as cushions, a wobble cushion, bean bags or chairs (ideally a swing chair) and allow them to sit if standing is too uncomfortable, or vice versa,
  - Always adapt the activity so that the person can participate to their best ability,
  - Never force a young autistic person to be still or to stop stimming or suggest it's easy to be still or that they need to try more.

## Using a sensory profile and sensory passport

A sensory profile is a tool that a young person fills out to learn more about their own unique sensory system. The young person answers questions about how they generally respond to sensory information and this in turns provides insight into the young person's unique sensory processing patterns and responses.

A sensory passport is a document which contains information about an Autistic person's particular needs. It is a whole system approach for the individual. It looks at communication needs and preferences, concentration, sensory triggers in the environment, routine and predictability, management of anxiety and social interactions. It includes helpful tactics and strategies that helps you adapt the environment to meet each young person's unique sensory needs. AsIAM recommend making this template available to young people to fill out if they wish:

[www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-All-About-Me.pdf](http://www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-All-About-Me.pdf).



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## Sensory audit

A sensory audit is an activity which looks at the youth work space from a sensory perspective. It can be conducted by the youth worker alone, however it is more inclusive when it is done with the youth group as a whole. A sensory audit helps you assess what can be done to make your environment as autistic-friendly as possible for the different Autistic individuals you work with. It will include evaluating the different sensory elements in different sections of the space, and at different times. It will also note any changes that might or will happen in the environment including any anticipated changes in routine. See AsIAM Sensory Audit template:

[www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-1.pdf](http://www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-1.pdf).

Similarly, a Sensory Environment Checklist can guide you to consider the different sensory responses to an environment that some people may experience. Just as we audit our youth spaces on their physical accessibility, it is possible to audit and then create environments that seek to meet everyone's needs by better understanding the sensory responses and preferences of neurodiverse communities. This online sensory environment checklist tool helps you identify what to look for and provides visuals to show what is desirable or undesirable in your youth work setting. It also lets you save your responses.

<https://bbc.github.io/uxd-cognitive/index.html>



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## Creating a sensory space

A sensory space is a designated area that an Autistic person can use if they become overwhelmed by the environment or by stress or anxiety. What you put into the sensory space should be directly linked to the Autistic person's needs. Below are some examples of what a sensory space may contain in a youth work setting:

- An empty space with a soft furniture, such as an armchair or beanbag chair, away from the overstimulation of the youth group activity. There should be room for the young person to move if that is what they need to do.
- The young person should be in control of the sensory input they need at that time.
  - ✓ It should be a space where they can make or hear noise or just have quiet. Headphones with music they can control is helpful.
- Provide a yoga ball, mini trampoline or wobble board for movement-based sensory input.
- Have low soft lighting, LED strip, smart light, battery operated candles or a lava lamp to create a soothing atmosphere
- Include soft cushions, weight blanket, or blankets to provide a comforting tactile experience
- Elements from nature such as plants or a natural light source are helpful but with an option to cut off any light with black out blinds or curtains



This equipment can usually be set up, packed away and stored easily. It should be located near the activity

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space, so it is easily accessible for the young people and the youth worker can monitor it. If there is no suitable space available, a pop-up black out tent or room divider is another way of creating a sensory space.

For some young people just going outside for a short walk (slow or brisk to suit their needs at the time) is what they need.

### Sensory box

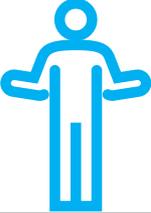
If a separate sensory space is not possible a sensory box is an alternative way to provide sensory support that young people should be free to use whenever they need. The box should not be locked in a way that requires the young person to ask for it but should be freely available for them to access when they need it. A sensory box contains sensory equipment relative to each individual's needs. Examples of items that you might include in a relaxation box include:

Sensory need	Resources
<p data-bbox="204 1283 472 1317"><b>TACTILE (TOUCH)</b></p> 	<p data-bbox="564 1223 1350 1417">Putty, bubble wrap, tissues for ripping, and stress ball for those that prefer heavier tactile input, spiky massage ball, weight blanket or lap pad, lava tiles, feathers, boink, magnet balls,</p>   

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<p><b>OLFACTORY (SMELL)</b></p> 	<p>Items scented with lavender or other subtle calming essential oils, but make sure they are properly sealed so as not to contaminate and overpower other things in the box. Cinnamon, hot chocolate, or tea, are also good.</p> 
<p><b>VISUAL</b></p> 	<p>Sensory bottles, kaleidoscopes, liquid/sand shakers, sunglasses, eye mask, mini bubble tube.</p>   
<p><b>AUDITORY (SOUND)</b></p> 	<p>Ear defenders, mini rain maker, music player with the young person's preferred music on it, headphones</p>   

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<p><b>GUSTATORY (TASTE)</b></p> 	<p>Snacks with different textures:</p> <p>Chewing gum/chewing straw/chew aids, something that takes lots of jaw effort to eat like a big bread roll, or sour or soft food like tofu, passionfruit, hot chocolate or tea.</p> 
<p><b>PROPRIOCEPTION</b> (body awareness and movement, control and spatial awareness)</p> 	<p>Weighted blanket, bean bags, pillow, resistance bands, hand massager, ball to catch &amp; throw.</p> 
<p><b>VESTIBULAR</b> (Balance and movement)</p> 	<p>Skipping rope, yoga pose cards, wobble board, swing chair (fixed at two points) hammock, hula-hoop, balance pods</p> 

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<p><b>INTEROCEPTION</b> (awareness of the body and feelings)</p> 	<p>Drawing paper and pens, mindfulness colouring books, water, fidget beads, expandable breathing ball.</p> 
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A relaxation box may also contain aids for communication, cognitive distraction and aids to calm breathing, all of which are helpful for interoception to help someone connect with how they are feeling. They can be important tools when an Autistic person is overwhelmed.

For more on sensory overload and research on reducing sensory overload in outdoor spaces see: <https://youtu.be/nElbNPOmRhY?t=703>

## Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour)

It's important to be aware and understanding when an Autistic person is stimming. Some stims are more obvious (e.g. making noise, flapping hands) and some are less noticeable (tapping feet, wiggling toes or fingers). People may be surprised or confused when they see someone stim but stimming for an Autistic person is as natural as breathing. If an Autistic individual is prevented from or doesn't get an opportunity to stim to meet their sensory needs, it can be painful and can lead them to withdraw and 'shut down' or to

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experience a meltdown. It helps to remember that:

- Both neurotypical and Autistic people stim – in some cases Autistic people may stim more often and/or more noticeably
- Examples of stimming behaviours include jumping, rocking, flapping, fidgeting with hands, hair, jewellery or clothes, making repeated sounds or repeating other vocalisations (echolalia)
- Stimming aids well-being, expression, self-regulation, relaxation, concentration and focus
- Stimming can communicate a feeling or emotion, including happiness, excitement, fear, sadness, or contentedness etc.
- Stimming can help to self-regulate when overwhelmed but can also just be something someone does when they are happy or excited.
- Stimming is an unconscious act, the person may not be aware they are doing it



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## 2 Supporting young people around communication

### Tips to facilitate communication

**Don't use unnecessary words:** Unnecessarily long sentences and complicated vocabulary, or talking too quickly, can lead to longer processing time. Some Autistic people, however, really enjoy learning new vocabulary and expanding their lexicon. Always allow wait time for the young person to respond.

**Say exactly what you mean:** Use clear and concise language, free of irony, sarcasm, figures of speech and social communication. While Autistic people can struggle to understand when neurotypical people are being ironic or sarcastic, some do enjoy using sarcasm or irony when talking with others, especially other Autistic peers who understand Autistic sarcasm and irony because they have similar communication styles.

Unless the Autistic person asks you to explain something, do not reword a statement they ask you to repeat; try to say what you said before in as similar a way as possible. Rewording what you have said can create more confusion.

Check for understanding – ask them to repeat back to you or write down what you said, or show you, but only if they are comfortable doing that.

**Break instructions into smaller steps:** It can be a struggle to 'fill in the blanks' when given vague instructions. Think carefully about the steps involved in an activity and explain each step simply and clearly.

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**Use visual aids where appropriate:** Visual aids can often help to support communication but check with the individual first to see if they would find it useful.

**Use the person's name at the beginning of the sentence when speaking to them:** This draws their attention before the information is given putting the young person in the best position to take in the information. However, do gauge the young person's reaction as they may interpret their name being used in the beginning as leading into a reprimand. When using their name keep your tone warm.

**Be mindful of the volume and tone of your speech around young people who are sensitive to sound/noise:** A person hypersensitive to sound may interpret subtle changes in tone of voice more intensely and feel as though they are being shouted at. Using a directive tone can sound angry or authoritarian.

**Build a communication profile:**

- Ask the young person what their preferred communication style is, remembering that this may not be fixed; some Autistic young people may change their preferred style from time to time
  - ✓ Ask the person if they prefer a different communication style when stressed
- Written communication may be better for some while spoken communication may be better for others

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## Tips on using praise

We use praise to communicate when a particular behaviour is positive and we would like to see it repeated. Autistic young people, like others, often respond well to praise but it must be specific so that they understand what they are being praised for. Over-praising for non-specific reasons can be confusing. General praise, such as ‘well done,’ ‘fair play,’ ‘good job,’ doesn’t give any information about what the young person did that was worthy of the praise. It is more helpful to give praise in a way that every member of the group is aware of the reason for which it is being given; this will support any Autistic young person in the group who needs this specificity.

It is especially important that you don’t praise an Autistic person for modifying their behaviour to more neurotypical ways as this can reinforce masking behaviours. Praise can be used effectively in the youth setting to promote difference as a positive attribute; for example, when someone interprets an instruction differently.

### Examples of praise that use specific language

- Address the individual you are praising – ‘Toby, you have explained that point very clearly’
- ‘That is really good concentration’
- ‘It is very interesting how you think about that’
- ‘You all worked really well together when you all...’
- ‘I really like how you have interpreted that



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instruction by...'

- 'It's great to see all the different ways we can do X'
- 'Using that way of doing things (be specific) is a really good idea' etc.

It is important to be aware that praise may lead some Autistic people to experience demand anxiety. This is where they interpret your praise as taking control away from them.

## Managing social communication

Typically, people develop very individual communication styles, but this can present difficulties when neurotypical and Autistic young people interact. Autistic young people can find it difficult to follow neurotypical facial expressions because what is used in one situation could have a totally different meaning when the same expression is used in a different context. Likewise, a neurotypical young person can struggle to understand Autistic facial expressions as they often do not mean the same thing as neurotypical facial expressions do.

Building communication between neurotypical and Autistic members of a group involves learning to understand each other's communication styles. Similar to learning a new language or engaging with an unfamiliar culture, neurotypical people and Autistic people can both learn each other's different ways of communication and they can begin to build a shared way of communicating that incorporates both styles.



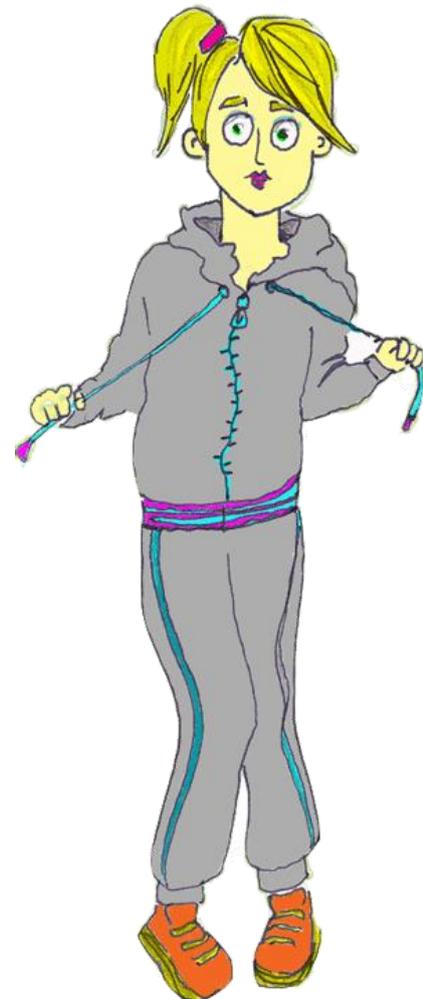
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While shared ways of communicating is the long-term goal there will be times when a young person interprets instructions differently to how they were meant. A tip to managing this is to reframe the young person's response as 'creative interpretation', an attitude you want to foster in youth work settings. This lets the whole group know that you encourage creative interpretation and you are not looking for or assuming there is one 'right' answer.

In a situation where instructions need to be followed exactly, it is important to ensure that social communication is not the primary method used to deliver the instruction or message to the group. It should be accompanied by clear and concise spoken or written instructions or by using pictures to communicate instructions if this suits the young person's communication style.

We can support young people by:

- Ensuring that we explain our actions
- Choosing words carefully to avoid misunderstanding
- Using emotions in context; connect facial expressions to their context to help understanding
- Beginning with what a person is familiar with and what they will recognise
- Adopting a slow enough pace to allow time to process and facilitate understanding (remember they are taking in and processing more information than a neurotypical person).



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## Expressive language

Many Autistic young people have exceptional expressive language skills while others may have difficulty expressing themselves. Strategies to strengthen expressive language include:

- Observe – pay close attention to the young person
- Wait – do not be tempted to talk or become involved too quickly. Give the young person time to speak (count to 10, or even 30, in your head)
- Listen – be an active listener and don't assume you know what the young person wants<sup>xi</sup>
- Find a topic that the young person has a special interest in and invite them to talk about that. Autistic people very often have the ability to observe and focus intensely on areas which interest them. These interests can be harnessed to positively promote participation and friendships. However, never use an Autistic person's special interest as a bargaining or a reinforcement tool to get them to do something they are uncomfortable doing.
- Sometimes when an Autistic person has a decision to make or a problem to solve, they can find it helpful to process it by talking at someone, rather than conversing back and forth. In effect, they ask a question, discuss it out loud and then answer it themselves. Having someone listen and maybe feedback at the end can be immensely helpful for some Autistic young people, although sometimes feedback isn't necessary. This process can be therapeutic and aid processing.
- Autistic individuals may prefer to express themselves in alternative ways to spoken language, for example, through movement, dancing, music, art, visual communication, and communicating with alternative augmented communication (AAC). Autistic people who primarily use spoken language may also prefer and find it beneficial to use AAC from time to time, such as using picture communication apps, or talking devices.

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### 3 How to support young people around social interaction

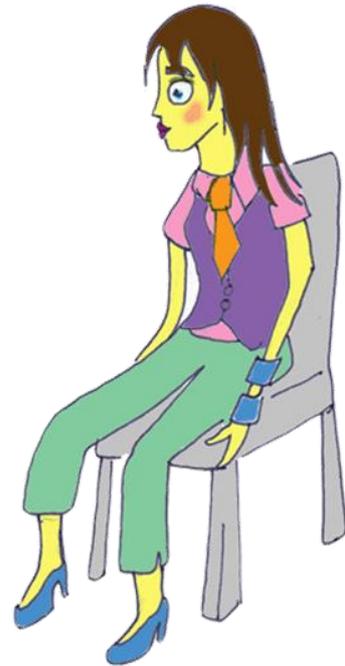
#### Prepare the young people for social situations

Developing social scripts and using a visual agenda on the wall in the youth space can be helpful to create the right conditions for social interaction.

#### Social scripts

Developing a social script can be helpful for an Autistic person who finds new situations or specific situations challenging. They should only be used when the group has a description first of what is to happen. A social script is an easy-to-read document that uses clear language and simple pictures to convey:

- Details of how a situation or event will play out
- Any expectations that will be placed on the young people
- Supports that are available to any young person if they feel overwhelmed

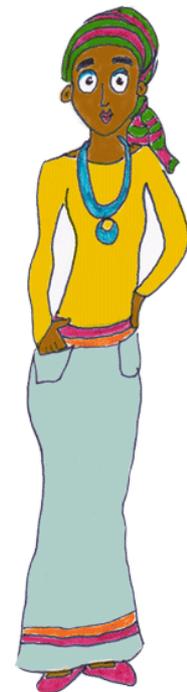


Creating a social script which outlines in detail what is involved in an upcoming activity is helpful for all young people on their first day, and especially so for Autistic members. It can then be used, if needed, by an Autistic young person to re-familiarise themselves with what to expect in the youth setting each time they attend.

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A social script might show:

- A photo of the venue, its name and address
- A photo of the specific youth space, and map of the building showing its location or facilities
- Photos of youth workers and any facilitators, with their names and where they will be when the young person arrives at the venue
- Instructions on what to do on arrival – such as where to wait
- Clarity on when the group will start – for example, saying the activity begins when everyone arrives
- A photo or image of group work
- Instructions on what typically happens in group work – such as listening to others, giving opinions, completing tasks
- Instructions on what to do if they need help (they can agree a signal with the youth worker so that you both understand when help is needed)
- What they can do if they feel anxious – such as take a break from the group, use the quiet space or relaxation box, ask to go home
- The time the youth work session ends, where to pick up belongings and where to meet their parent/guardian



Note: A social script should only be used to describe what to expect, so the Autistic person will feel less unpredictability in a new context. It should never be used to train Autistic people in neurotypical social skills as this only encourages masking.

## Using a visual agenda

A visual agenda describes the structure of a workshop in time and space and it can be an important resource for Autistic young people who prefer visual communication. An Autistic young person may perceive a youth work session

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differently to others which can lead to higher levels of uncertainty and a desire to know where they are in the structure of the session, what is coming next and how long until they are finished. Having a simple visual agenda on display, which can be put together minutes before the session using a set of prepared images, provides the young person with a strategy to use if they become anxious about what is happening next. In a similar way, there may be a sudden change to the session while it is taking place and this can be displayed visually.

A visual agenda might include images of:

- A group circle – such as a welcome circle or feedback circle
- Group work – task focused, or activity focussed
- Pair work or small group work
- Instruction time when the youth worker or facilitator speaks or demonstrates how to do something



These pictures can all be arranged as appropriate and in the order that they will happen for each session. They should be changed if something in the session has to be altered. While you might develop this as a support to meet the needs of an Autistic participant, it will benefit other participants as well.

There are also Apps you can use to create a visual agenda that the Autistic young person can have on their phone or tablet device. Apps provide a number of images, including options to upload images of personal significance to each individual.

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However, do remember that one size does not fit all – you may work with some young Autistic people who prefer to listen and discuss what is going to happen, rather than use a visual agenda. Ask each person what they prefer or if this is not possible, use a trial and error approach to find what works. Be sure to observe the person’s reaction and how they adapt to using different supports.

## Supporting young people to work in pairs/groups

Young people may find working with others to be challenging, especially when some are neurotypical and others are Autistic. However, working together and building compassion and empathy is a key aspect of youth work and an essential life skill to develop – so it is important not to shy away from this challenge.

It is important for Autistic young people to make positive associations with group work, so it is important to build relationships and make sure they are working with people they like and get on well with from the beginning. Autistic people are shown to be particularly good at working with different people, youth work can support them in further developing this skill. The following tips can help:

- Slowly introduce others into a group if it will be challenging for the Autistic young person to settle in,
- Keep group work short at the beginning and slowly lengthen the time, and check in on the group regularly to see how they are getting on,
- Support the young Autistic person to share their ideas and get involved in the group,



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- Foster independence and avoid being over-supportive. If they seem to be getting on well without much encouragement or support from the youth worker, notice this and allow them to continue as they are,
- If there is an activity that requires breaking into smaller groups, make sure to divide the groups using numbers/fruit or another clearly delineated assignment methods: for example, don't pick a leader and ask them to choose the members of a group, or don't say "please get into group" as this can be extremely anxiety provoking for Autistic young people.

**"I can find being with people my own age difficult. It is easier to be with younger or older people. Activities that focus on building a bond with people my own age really help me settle in."**

## Managing free time

Unstructured and unpredictable free time can induce anxiety for Autistic people. The following tips can make free time a little easier:

- Use a visual timer to show how long free time will last for - a sand timer or clock timer such as a time timer, which provides a visual of time can be very effective in clarifying an abstract concept of time
- Making small talk can be challenging for an Autistic person so give the option for the young people to engage in a range of activities during their free time. Activities, such as a deck of cards, could be provided and/or the young people may bring their own activities for free time too. This will allow the young Autistic person to have a familiar activity that they enjoy and makes them feel safe. This also lends itself as a topic of conversation which can make social interaction easier
- Until the young people develop friendships create buddy groups –



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ideally of three people - to ensure that no one is being left out during free time. You can change the buddy groups each time you meet to encourage people to get to know one another. It is good to assign them randomly using a lottery system or pick sticks, or the youth worker can pre-plan the buddy combinations.

- At lunch or snack time it can be useful to have conversation tables, where there is a topic per table and gives a starting point to talk about something.
- Communication wrist bands can be a useful, subtle and an accessible way for people to be able to communicate what is best for them, in the moment.

- ❖ Red wrist band means: “I am listening but please don’t try and talk to me just now”
- ❖ Green means: “I would like to talk but find it hard to initiate conversation.”



Using the wristbands reduces the likelihood of the young person being misunderstood when they want to be in a social group but would prefer to just listen, or they may want to engage but not know how to approach others. The wrist bands can be kept in a jar in the youth setting for anyone who needs to take one. They can be equally useful for neurotypical young people.

## Managing conflict

Conflict can happen in any group setting. Sometimes, for an Autistic young person, conflict can arise when their communication or behaviour is misunderstood by their peers, or when their needs are not met. This is where double empathy fails - neurotypical people can often misunderstand or misinterpret autistic behaviour and communication. For example, emotions such as being upset, anxious or fearful can be displayed as anger or

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defensiveness and this can lead to conflict. If a conflict arises between young people in a youth setting, keep in mind the following:

- Allow the young people who were involved in the conflict to have time and space to reflect on what happened before addressing it.
- It might be useful to do a reflective activity to explore how people reflect. Some Autistic young people need to actively reflect.
- Allow all the young people involved to express their experience of the conflict. Encourage the use of statements beginning with 'I': such as; 'I understand the situation as.., I think...', as opposed to 'you did'. Be aware, when asking Autistic young people to say how they feel, that many Autistic people can experience alexithymia and find it hard to connect what they feel with what happened. If it is a high stress situation they may need extra time to process before they can fully reflect.

(Sometimes reflection can last longer or occur much later for Autistic people so if days or even a week later an Autistic person starts to reflect on something that happened some time before, don't say, "that's over and done with now", or "don't worry about that", because for the Autistic person it might still be very relevant as they may have just fully processed it and will need to reflect to be able to learn from it).

- Use restorative practice, i.e. each individual focuses on their part in the conflict, acknowledges any harm they caused to the other person and takes responsibility for repairing the harm caused. It involves facilitating a solution rather than imposing a sanction.
- For your younger members, discuss what happened with the parents/guardians. Clearly explain each young person's side of the



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conflict and the solution that was agreed on.

- Emotions often run high for young people (and their parents/guardians) during conflict, so ensure that as a youth worker you step back from the situation, remind yourself of this and don't take anything that is said personally.



A key point to remember is that if an Autistic young person becomes engaged in a conflict due to anxiety or sensory overload, they may not be in full control of their behaviour at this time. Ensure that this is taken into consideration when resolving the conflict.

## Supporting an Autistic young person with anxiety

If an Autistic young person exhibits signs of anxiety in the youth setting the following options can be suggested to support them in identifying how they are feeling and to choose a strategy to best meet their needs. Invite them to choose from the following options:

- 1) Stay with the group and observe their peers engaging in the activity while not actively participating themselves (a red communication wrist band would work well here)
- 2) Leave the group and observe from within the room
- 3) Leave the group but stay in the room and self-soothe/self-regulate
- 4) Leave the room and self-soothe if an agreed safe space and an additional adult is available. Self-soothing activities to self-regulate include stimming, breathing exercises, movement and/or distraction activities
- 5) Offer to call a parent/guardian or invite the young person to call them

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Remember that you will not know what has happened to the young person that day or that week that may have impacted on their emotional state. A young person may present with needs that can be addressed using the first option in the anxiety support guide or they may already be at option 4 or 5 by the time they arrive at the youth centre. Meet the young person where they are at and address the needs that present themselves.



## Self-soothing activities

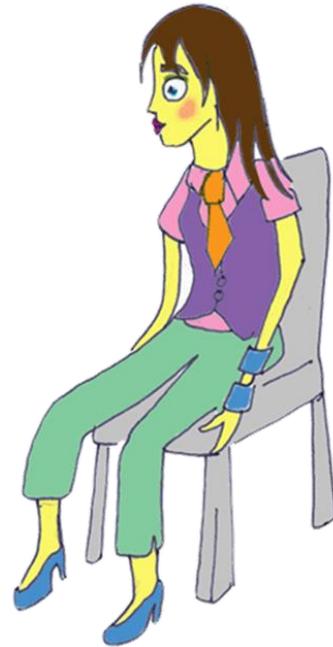
Self-soothing activities include the following:

- Communication cards or an emotions fan can support the young person in reflecting on and establishing their thoughts and feelings. It also assists them in communicating this to others if needed.
- Cognitive distraction activities can be a helpful strategy to use when a person is extremely stressed and overwhelmed. Examples of these activities include crosswords, sudoku, Rubix cube etc., which can completely distract the brain from the anxiety.
- Breathing exercises such as counting breaths, breathing around the circumference of a shape, blowing a balloon, breathing through a straw or blowing mini pom poms using a straw can be effective in helping a person to regulate and calm their breathing. However, some Autistic people will find breathing exercises distressing as they can be experienced as an uncomfortable sensory feeling. If an Autistic person indicates that a breathing exercise is uncomfortable for them do not encourage them to continue.
- Letting the person talk about their special interest or how they are feeling or thinking can also help offload what is going on inside their head and help them calm down by getting it all out.

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## Tips for supporting a young person who is finding it hard to attend the youth group

- Check-in with the young person
- Contact their parent/guardian if the young person has been missing for more than 2 weeks
- Encourage the young person to get to the car park of the building and assure them that there is no pressure to come into the building
- Make no judgement on their behaviour when a young person is struggling
- Recognise all forms of participation
- Humour can be very helpful in dealing with fear and anxiety but do not devalue their experience. Be aware that Autistic people may struggle to understand some neurotypical jokes. Provide clarification when things are meant to be funny if there appears to be a misunderstanding. Likewise, neurotypical people may struggle to understand Autistic humour and it is important to ask what is meant if you don't understand.
- Gauge whether asking them how they are feeling is a good idea or not. It is often appropriate to ask only if you have excellent rapport with them. If you do ask:
  - ✓ Do so with compassion and expect an honest answer
  - ✓ Discuss why they don't want to come into the youth group
  - ✓ Remind the young person of strategies they can use in the youth group setting
  - ✓ Validate how they feel even if you do not understand it.
  - ✓ Don't tell them everything will be fine or it's not that bad; respect how they feel, whether you agree with it or not.
  - ✓ Encourage and support the young person to go beyond their comfort zone but don't push them too hard. Baby steps is the best way forward.



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It may be the case that the best a young person can do on one particular day is to leave the group and self-soothe. Ensure they understand that this is okay and that their participation has been recognised.

### **Allay parent's anxiety**

Make sure the parents know that they can approach you to discuss any worries or concerns they have and explain the different ways they can contact you. Listen with patience, understanding, and compassion. Be mindful that parents of Autistic young people may also be Autistic or have other neurodivergences themselves, and therefore may express their concerns in ways you aren't expecting. They may be concerned about particular things such as predictability, sensory environment etc.

### **Creating a safe space to disclose additional needs**

Parents and/or young people may have concerns around disclosing their diagnosis or additional needs. Youth workers need to portray a sense of confidence, knowledge and acceptance when interacting with parents and young people and inviting disclosure. Make it clear that the young person will be fully supported, there will be no judgement and they will be celebrated for who they are, regardless of any additional needs. This will put them at ease, enabling the best conditions for disclosure. Empathy for their concerns and fears around the disclosure of needs is key to building a relationship of trust.



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## Disclosure through a membership form

One way that disclosure is encouraged is by including the option in membership or registration forms. However, a parent(s) may be uncomfortable with writing down potentially sensitive information on a form and might prefer to speak to the youth worker on the phone or in person about their child's needs. The following format can be used on a form and/or in a conversation:

Please note: If you answer 'Yes' to any of the below, please write your answers or call (insert the youth worker's name and number/email) in confidence. Please note that information may have to be shared with others in the interest of your child's welfare.

<p>Does your child have any additional needs of which we need to be aware?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/>    No <input type="checkbox"/>    If 'Yes' please give details:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Is your child Autistic/neurodivergent? If so, is there anything we need to be aware of regarding their neurodivergency?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/>    No <input type="checkbox"/>    If 'Yes' please give details:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Does your child have any medical conditions of which we need to be aware?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/>    No <input type="checkbox"/>    If 'Yes' please give details:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Does your child have any allergies of which we need to be aware?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/>    No <input type="checkbox"/>    If 'Yes' please give details:</p> <p>.....</p>
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## The role of inclusive practice in a case of non-disclosure

In the event that a parent or young person chooses not to disclose any personal information about themselves, the youth worker must ensure that their practice is inclusive in order to support any undisclosed needs. When needs arise that have not been disclosed, these needs should still be facilitated. **A diagnosis or written disclosure is not necessary for you to give the necessary support to a young person.** Instead, there should be a presumption of diversity in any group, and this should be considered when planning workshops. For example, the strategies suggested in this section can be introduced to the whole group. In particular, sending preparatory notes in advance of the next group meeting, allows those who need additional support to make use of this offer without having to disclose why.



### Approaching a parent or young person with your concerns

If a youth worker sees that a young person has apparent needs and they feel they need further information to best support the young person they may want to discuss this with a parent. Where possible it is best to speak with the young person first, this can be helpful in gaining extra information before approaching the parent. This requires considered thought on what to say. Use concrete examples and frame questions that

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describe what you have noticed. This can open up a non-threatening, non-judgemental conversation, for example:

‘I noticed that you/your young person has trouble focusing on tasks. Is there something I can do to help with this? Is there something happening in the youth group that is getting in the way?’

It is important for the youth worker to generalise the issue and not to suggest any specific needs or diagnosis, as they are not qualified to do so. The parent or young person may not disclose on the first occasion that this conversation is held, especially if they are protective of their information due to previous negative experiences. However, once the youth worker remains consistent with their approach and their attitude to difference, the parent/young person may feel more comfortable.

**“I found it helpful when our drama facilitator talked to me 1 on 1 and gave me the confidence and responsibility to manage myself. Ask Autistic people if there’s anything they need. But, most importantly, treat them the same as anyone else and allow them to be responsible for themselves.”**

## Promoting a culture of inclusion

The following approaches will create a culture of inclusion that will benefit everyone, and will also meet some of Autistic young people’s specific needs:

- **Learn to work to strengths and see the strengths of others**

Support young people to identify what they are good at and to use those strengths to overcome challenges. Once they have this skill, it is easier to transfer this thinking to other people. Support them to recognise other people’s strengths and recognise that when a group of

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people lend their strong points to one another, this leads to effective teamwork.

- **Support others when they are struggling**

Encourage young people to support their peers when they are struggling with a task. Promote a climate where everyone does this for each other, so that nobody is left struggling alone.

- **Look for and respect an individual's level of participation**

It is important that a person's level of participation is noticed and validated by the youth worker. A low level of participation may be the very best that the young person can do on a particular day because of what they are experiencing. Respect that they have made the effort to show up, despite the challenges they are experiencing, and view this as the young person trying their best.

- **Look for progress, no matter how small**

Progress may not happen from one week to another, or even within a few sessions. The timeline for progress and types of progress will be different for each individual. Be positive: assuming that progress is there before you look for it, makes it easier to find. It could be as small as a young person participating in an activity for one minute longer than they previously did. Acknowledging and celebrating progress, no matter how small, will instil a sense of confidence and belonging in the young people.

- **Role-model the way you want the young people to work together and treat each other.**

The youth worker leads on creating a culture of inclusion in the group that will allow Autistic people to participate and thrive.

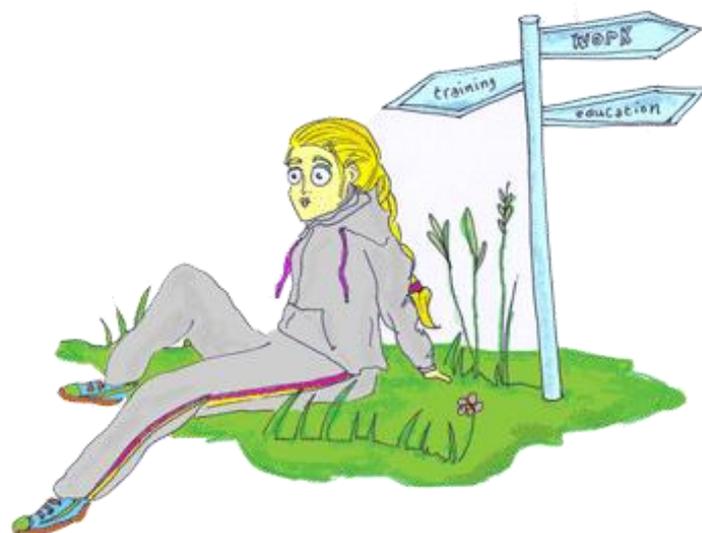
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- **Build self-awareness in your youth work practice**

Adopting a values lens, challenging privilege, and becoming self-aware of what we carry with us allows us to be better, more inclusive youth workers. Being reflective in our practice by building awareness and challenging your own unconscious bias is important. Be aware of disablist/ableist thinking that positions Autistic people as less than, less capable, or slower at doing things than neurotypical people. Bring awareness to, and challenge, disablist/ableist language that has the effect of marginalising Autistic people (for example, using terms such as high or low functioning, or language which suggests that being Autistic is something wrong or broken or that needs to be fixed or cured, or describing autism as something bad or sad and needs sympathy for, or that is upsetting or best avoided).

## Become informed

Resources and contact details are included in the Appendix at the end of this chapter. You can also consult the contacts listed for additional support and advice. **In all cases, remember that the expert on each person is the young person themselves.** Their parents/guardians will also have useful information.



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# Challenging myths about Autistic young people

One very practical way of challenging attitudes is to be aware of common myths about Autistic people and have the facts that debunk them. You can also use these myths in your youth work activities and make sure that colleagues and volunteers are aware of them.

## Myth 1 Autism is a learning / intellectual disability

No. A learning or intellectual disability is broadly defined as impacting on adaptability and reasoning skills. An Autistic person may be separately diagnosed with a co-occurring learning or intellectual disability.

## Myth 2 Autism is a medical condition

Autism is not a medical condition; it is one of life's many neurodivergencies. Autism is not a disease or disorder. It is not something that can, or should ever, be thought of as something that is curable or that a cure should be found for. Autism does not have symptoms, it has features or characteristics and each way someone experiences being Autistic is different, just as each way someone experiences being neurotypical is different. Autistic people are born Autistic and will remain Autistic for their entire life.

## Myth 3 Autistic people don't make friends

The reason most of us make friends with particular people is because we get along well with each other and have common interests. Autistic people are no different.

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## Myth 4 Autistic people are all the same

Autistic people are individuals and will differ in many ways from each other. The Autistic population has the same amount of diversity in it as the neurotypical population. In the same way that there are many different types of neurotypical people - personalities, interests, education and career progression, parenting styles, life journeys, learning styles etc. - the same diversity exists with the Autistic population too. No human beings are the same, we are all unique.

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## Checklist 6 B - How accessible is your organisation to Autistic young people?

This checklist can help you to identify how you can improve your service for Autistic young people

### Programme planning and delivery

**Our programmes are designed and delivered to include the diverse needs and identities of Autistic young people**

- Our programmes and activities are designed with all young people in mind including those who are Autistic or have other neurodivergencies
- YES      PARTLY      NO

### Participation

**We make sure we include the voices and expressions of young people at all levels of our youth service**

- Autistic young people have their views and opinions heard and are involved in decision making, such as having input about how services are run. They are involved in consultations at all levels of the organisation such as on the Board, on a youth committee or management committee and these are conducted in ways that are accessible and age appropriate etc.
- YES      PARTLY      NO

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## Public image

### How we present our service to our community

#### Promoting our service

- |   |     |        |    |
|---|-----|--------|----|
| • Our written information is easy to read, uses clear English and avoids jargon   | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • Photos and drawings of young people we use in promotional material feature a range of young people, including Neurodivergent young people | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • We involve young people in the production of our promotional material, including Autistic young people                                    | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • We network with and provide promotional material to a wide range of services, including autistic support groups                           | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • Young people can phone, text, email or fax our service  | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • Young people can use social media to keep in contact with our service   | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • We use clear print in our printed material (see guidelines in Chapter 5)  | YES | PARTLY | NO |

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## Partnerships and networks

- |  |     |        |    |
|--|-----|--------|----|
| • We have a referral list of services for young people and their families                    | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • Our service works in partnership with autism support groups to make our service accessible | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • We provide information about our service to autism support groups                          | YES | PARTLY | NO |

## Professional development

**Our staff and volunteers are trained and supported to deliver an inclusive youth service**

- |   |     |        |    |
|---|-----|--------|----|
| • Our staff and volunteers are trained in basic awareness on autism   | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • Our staff and volunteers have strategies in place for promoting friendships and connections among young people attending youth activities | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • We employ an inclusion worker or someone with specific training or skills on working with Autistic young people                           | YES | PARTLY | NO |
| • We are a learning organisation, committed to continuous professional development, keeping up to date with research and                    | YES | PARTLY | NO |

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emerging perspectives of the Autistic  
community

## Policies and procedures

**We have a written commitment to deliver an equal and inclusive service**

- |   |            |               |           |
|---|------------|---------------|-----------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our organisation has a written commitment to equality and inclusion that names our commitment to inclusion of Autistic people</li> </ul> | <p>YES</p> | <p>PARTLY</p> | <p>NO</p> |
|---|------------|---------------|-----------|
- 

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## Useful contacts – Republic of Ireland

<p><b>AsIAM</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (01) 4453203</p> <p><b>Email:</b> email through the Contact Us form on our website</p> <p><b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.asiam.ie">www.asiam.ie</a></p>	<p>AsIAM Is Ireland’s National Autism Charity. It provides information and advocacy supports to the community, including Autism ID cards, and a number of nationally and internationally unique training and accreditation programmes for organisations to become autism-friendly. We also have a search feature to find supports and services in your local area.</p>
<p><b>ASD (Autism supporting Diversity) Ireland</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> 1800 71 88 65</p> <p><b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.asdireland.ie">www.asdireland.ie</a></p>	<p>Provides socially inclusive activities and a variety of supports for Autistic people and their families. Based in Limerick but provides activities nationwide.</p>
<p><b>AHEAD</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (01) 7164396</p> <p><b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:ahead@ahead.ie">ahead@ahead.ie</a></p> <p><b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.ahead.ie">www.ahead.ie</a></p>	<p>Provides information to students and graduates with disabilities, teachers, guidance counsellors and parents on disability issues in education. Also undertakes research in this area and advocates for higher education to be more inclusive.</p>

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**Arch Clubs****Phone:** (085) 8676134**Email:** [archclubs.adm@gmail.com](mailto:archclubs.adm@gmail.com)**Web:** <https://www.archclubs.com/>

An Arch Club is a social club for people of all ages with an intellectual disability. Many of the clubs offer different activities. They have 40 clubs around the country.

**Aspire****Phone:** (089) 465 2026**Email:** [info@aspireireland.ie](mailto:info@aspireireland.ie)**Web:** [www.aspireireland.ie](http://www.aspireireland.ie)

Aspire is the Asperger's Syndrome Association of Ireland. They provide services and information for Autistic/Asperger individuals, and their families.

**Foróige Autism-Specific Big Brother Big Sister Programme****Phone:** (086) 0497089**Email:** [elaine.granaghan@foroige.ie](mailto:elaine.granaghan@foroige.ie)

The programme matches an adult volunteer with an Autistic young person who would benefit from having a mentor in their lives. The BBBS autism-specific office is based in Sligo.

**Galway Autism Partnership (GAP)****Phone:** (091) 588 899**Web:**[www.galwayautismpartnership.com](http://www.galwayautismpartnership.com)

Provides access to support, information, training, clubs and camps for Autistic individuals and their families.

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<p><b>Gheel Autism Services (Dublin and Kildare)</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (01) 6291596  <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@gheel.ie">info@gheel.ie</a>  <b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.gheel.ie">www.gheel.ie</a></p>	<p>Champions and supports Autistic people by providing day, residential, supported living and outreach services, with the goal of maximising independence and enhancing quality of life.</p>
<p><b>Snowflakes Autism Support (North Dublin)</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (01) 524 1544  <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@snowflakes.ie">info@snowflakes.ie</a>  <b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.snowflakes.ie">www.snowflakes.ie</a></p>	<p>Autism support group for families, also providing supports to members, such as through subsidised therapies, specialist talks and group meetings, as well as classes and events.</p>
<p><b>Shine Centre for Autism (Cork)</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (021) 4377052  <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@shineireland.com">info@shineireland.com</a>  <b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.shineireland.com">www.shineireland.com</a></p>	<p>Provides a number of services to Autistic children and their families.</p>
<p><b>The Rehab Group</b></p> <p><b>Phone:</b> (01) 205 7200  <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@rehab.ie">info@rehab.ie</a>  <b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.rehab.ie">www.rehab.ie</a></p>	<p>The Rehab Group provides services for adults and children with disabilities or disadvantage in their communities throughout Ireland, specifically around learning and employment through the National Learning Network.</p>

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## Autism Awareness Training

<p><b>Thriving Autistic</b></p> <p><b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:support@thrivingautistic.org">support@thrivingautistic.org</a></p> <p><b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.thrivingautistic.org">www.thrivingautistic.org</a></p>	<p>A social enterprise of Autistic and neurodivergent practitioners and professionals offering training/consultation, 1-1 and group support, and community webinars for mental health practitioners, various workplaces and interested organisations.</p>
<p><b>AUsome Training</b></p> <p><b>Email:</b> emails through the contact us form on their website</p> <p><b>Web:</b> <a href="http://www.ausometraining.com">www.ausometraining.com</a></p>	<p>Provides training to parents, teachers and professionals on Autism, designed and delivered by Autistic people.</p>

## Resources

### Sensory Checklist – AsIAM

<https://www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-1.pdf>

### All About Me: My Passport for Accessible & Autism-Friendly Public Services – AsIAM

<https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-All-About-Me.pdf>

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**Autism & Language: What's the Best Word – AsIAm**

<https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Autism-Language.pdf>

**Setting Up a Sensory Lounge – Middletown Centre for Autism**

<https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies/setting-up-a-sensory-lounge/>

**Introduction to Neurodiversity**

<https://youtu.be/UDzri9EvSjk>

**Let's Raise the Roof - A Social Model of Disability**

<https://youtu.be/OgQQ-1TmCaQ>

**Seeing the Unseen Autistic women experience**

<https://youtu.be/waz9pa8p2uU>

**What is ableism?**

<https://vimeo.com/492480733>

**Autistic Perception and Outdoor sensory space**

<https://youtu.be/z1bdqiZjLPo>

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## **Autistic Perception in University: Defining Disability: Our Stories**

<https://youtu.be/XFVd9k5CzK4?t=1058>

## **Neurodiversity Affirmative Paradigm – The Basics**

<https://youtu.be/C-euTkXCXZI>

## **What's the Story with Autism in Women, Jessica? Basically... with Stefanie Preissner**

<https://podcasts.apple.com/be/podcast/whats-the-story-with-autism-in-women-jessica/id1509726673?i=1000544172078&l=nl>

## **What's the Story with Autism, Adam and Michael? Basically... with Stefanie Preissner**

<https://podcasts.apple.com/be/podcast/whats-the-story-with-autism-adam-and-michael/id1509726673?i=1000542056079&l=fr>

## **Double Empathy explained quickly**

[https://youtu.be/YpO9BY\\_b4iY](https://youtu.be/YpO9BY_b4iY)

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# Bibliography

## Books

### Introduction to the Autistic Community

***What I (Don't) Know About Autism*** by Jody O'Neill

A sometimes comic, sometimes heart-breaking journey into the world of autism written as a play

***We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation*** by Eric Garcia

This book is a message from autistic people to their parents, friends, teachers, co-workers and doctors showing what autistic life is like. It's also a love letter to Autistic people. "For too long, we have been forced to navigate a world where all the road signs are written in another language."

***Welcome to the Autistic Community*** by Lar Berry (Cover Design), Autistic Self Advocacy Network (Contributor)

Written by Autistic people to welcome others just learning about their autism. It talks in plain language about how it affects our lives. It looks at our history, our community, and our rights.

***But You Don't Look Autistic at All*** by Bianca Toeps

Autism – that's being able to count matches really fast and knowing that 7 August 1984 was a Tuesday, right? Well, no. In this book, Bianca Toeps explains in great detail what life is like when you're autistic. She looks at what science says about autism (and why some theories can go straight in the bin).

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***Divergent Mind: Thriving In a World That Wasn't Designed For You***

by Jenera Nerenberg

A study of neurodivergent women—those with ADHD, autism, synesthesia, high sensitivity, and sensory processing disorder—exploring why these traits are overlooked in women and how society benefits from allowing their unique strengths to flourish.

***NeuroTribes: the Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity***

by Steve Silberman

Chronicling the brave and lonely journey of Autistic people and their families through the decades, Silberman provides long-sought solutions to the autism puzzle, while mapping out a path for our society toward a more humane world in which Autistic people have access to the resources they need to live happier, healthier, more secure, and more meaningful lives.

**For Autistic Young People*****The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens*** by Yenn Purkis and Tanya Masterman

This book explores what it feels like to be a young Autistic person and looks at all the brilliant things they can do. Full of insights about being awesome and autistic, this book celebrates the strengths of understanding the world in a different way. It also has tips for managing tricky situations such as meltdowns, sensory differences and anxiety. It includes fun activities and diary pages where you can write your thoughts and feelings to help you concentrate on your strengths and work on your challenges.

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***The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic***

by Siena Castellon

A go-to guide with advice and tools to help you flourish and achieve what you want in life. From the answers to everyday questions such as 'Am I using appropriate body language?' and 'Did I say the wrong thing?', through to discussing the importance of understanding your emotions, looking after your physical and mental health and coping with anxiety and sensory overloads. It includes practical tips on friendships, dating, body image, consent and appearance, as well as how to survive school and bullying.

***The Young Autistic Adult's Independence Handbook*** by Haley Moss

Are you living away from home for the first time, graduating from school or perhaps getting a new job? These transitions can be especially overwhelming to deal with as a young Autistic adult. This survival guide is bursting with neurodivergent-friendly advice from Autistic people themselves (and a few neurotypicals too) for young adults embarking on their own journeys of self-discovery and independence. From guidance on organising your own money, looking after your home and organising your social life to tips on self-advocacy and important life skills such as driving, voting and volunteering.

***The Independent Woman's Handbook for Super Safe Living on the Autistic Spectrum***

by Robyn Steward

This guide helps Autistic women live independently, make their own choices in life, and be safe whilst doing so.

***The Autism-Friendly Guide to Periods*** by Robyn Steward

A detailed guide for young people aged 9 to 16 on the basics of menstruation. Created in consultation with young people, this is a book that teaches young people about periods, which can be a scary and overwhelming issue.

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***The Autism Spectrum Guide to Sexuality and Relationships: Understand Yourself and Make Choices that are Right for You*** by Emma Goodall

Unravelling the complexities of relationships and sexuality, this straight-talking guide helps to navigate social, emotional and physical issues. Expert advice and real-life examples give you the knowledge to reflect on your own sexuality, provide you with information on different types of relationship, and gives you the confidence to decide which type of relationship is right for you. Together with important information on sexual health, this book will help you to understand how to find and maintain a relationship of your choosing in a safe and enjoyable way

***Queerly Autistic: The Ultimate Guide for LGBTQIA+ Teens on the Spectrum***

by Erin Ekins

This empowering and honest guide for LGBTQIA+ Autistic teens gives tools to figure out and explore gender identity and sexuality. From coming out to friends and family, staying safe in relationships and practicing safe sex, through to self-care and coping with bullying, being out and about in the LGBTQIA+ community and undergoing gender transition, this book is filled with essential information, advice, support and resources.

***The Autistic Trans Guide to Life*** by Yenn Purkis and Wenn Lawson

This survival guide gives Autistic trans and/or non-binary adults all the tools and strategies they need to live as their very best self. Blending personal accounts with evidence-based insights and up-to-date information, and written from a perspective of empowerment and self-acceptance, the book promotes pride, strength and authenticity, covering topics including self-advocacy, mental health and camouflaging and masking as well as coming out or transitioning socially and/or physically.

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## For those supporting Autistic Young people

### ***Standing Up for Myself*** by Evaleen Whelton

Focusing on social interaction this book is about empowering Neurodivergent teens to understand themselves, their boundaries and how others might try to manipulate them. Full of informative insight and exploratory exercises it presents strategies for dealing with conflict, bullying and general aspects of non-autistic communication.

### ***Supporting Transgender Autistic Youth and Adults*** by Finn Gratton

Advice on how professionals can tailor their practice to best serve with Autistic trans youth, and how parents can support their trans Autistic children. It addresses gender diversity, neuroqueer trauma, and how to support neuroqueer individuals. Written by a therapist who identifies as neuroqueer.

### ***Anatomy of Autism: A Pocket Guide for Educators, Parents, and Students*** by Diego Pena

“Trust me, I want to talk to you. My inability to speak is confused for my intelligence.” Diego Peña is a sharp-witted 9 year old boy whose goal is to deliver a message that shatters misconceptions about autism. Only Diego cannot yet speak. By pointing to letters on a laminated letter board and typing on a keyboard, he breaks through his silence to express his inner-thoughts in this pocket guide for individuals who support autistic students. Diego concisely articulates the challenges and dilemmas he faces with his sensory system, communication, and motor system. He thoughtfully explores the implications and possibilities of these challenges as a primary school student. His experiences nudge educators, therapists, parents, and students to rethink their approaches to supporting individuals who are autistic and non-speaking.

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***The Guide to Good Mental Health on the Autism Spectrum*** by Yenn Purkis, Emma Goodall and Jane Nugent

Filled with strategies and advice, this guide presents practical ways to improve the mental wellbeing of Autistic people. The book includes information on common mental health issues, as well as strategies for improving sleep patterns. Providing guidance on the benefits and drawbacks of therapy pets, medication, and psychotherapy, the authors offer balanced perspectives on treatment options and self-help strategies tailored to improve mental wellbeing.

***The ABCs of Autism Acceptance*** by Sparrow Rose Jones, Maxfield Sparrow

A guided tour of topics central to changing the way that autism is perceived, aimed at removing systemic barriers to access. Covering the basics of Autistic culture, it discusses recent developments and clarifies current understandings to those who are new to it, whether they are Autistic themselves or a friend/family member looking for resources to help themselves support the Autistic people in their lives more fully.

## Novels

***A Room Called Earth*** by Madeleine Ryan

This debut from a neurodiverse author explores a young woman's magical, sensitive, and passionate inner world. A young woman gets ready to go to a party. She arrives, feels overwhelmed, leaves, and then returns. Minutely attuned to the people who come into her view, and alternating between alienation and profound connection, she is hilarious, self-aware, sometimes acerbic, and always honest. And by the end of the night, she's shown us something radical about love, loss, and the need to belong

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***The Reason I Jump*** by Naoki Higashida

A very smart, self-aware, and charming memoir of a thirteen-year-old Autistic boy demonstrating how an autistic mind thinks, feels, perceives, and responds in ways few of us can imagine. Parents and family members who never thought they could get inside the head of their autistic loved one at last have a way to break through to the curious, subtle, and complex life within.

***Diary of a Young Naturalist chronicles*** by Dara McAnulty's world

This book chronicles the turning of 15-year-old Dara McAnulty's world through a year in his home patch in Northern Ireland. These vivid, evocative and moving diary entries about his connection to wildlife and the way he sees the world are raw in their telling.

***Can You See Me?*** by Libby Scott & Rebecca Westcott

Tally isn't ashamed of being autistic - even if it complicates life sometimes, it's part of who she is. But this is her first year at Kingswood Academy, and her best friend, Layla, is the only one who knows. And while a lot of other people are uncomfortable around Tally, Layla has never been one of them . . . until now.

***Do You Know Me?*** by Libby Scott & Rebecca Westcott (sequel novel)

In this sequel to *Can You See Me?*, Libby Scott and Rebecca Westcott return with another heart-warming and eye-opening story of friendship and middle school, inspired by Libby's own experiences of autism. Everyone else in Tally's grade seems excited for their class trip... And she knows she is supposed to be too. Ever since her classmates found out she is autistic, Tally has felt more comfortable being herself. But the end-of-year trip will be an entire week - her longest overnight trip ever. How will she sleep? What about all the bugs? What will her dog, Rupert, do without her at home?

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***Ways To Be Me*** by Libby Scott, Rebecca Westcott

The third book written and prequel to the bestselling *Can You See Me?* ten-year-old Tally had high hopes for Year 6. Being in the top class at school means a whole host of privileges, but even better than that is the school production - and Tally is convinced she'll win the lead role. But at home, things aren't going so well. Mum and Dad have been making Tally feel pressured and upset, and Tally wishes things didn't bother her so much - but they do, and sometimes she feels so misunderstood and frustrated, she could explode.

***M is for Autism: The Teenage Girl's Guide to Autism, and Everyone Else's*** by the students of Limpsfield Grange

M's world is tipsy-turvy, sweet and sour, and the beast of anxiety lurks outside classrooms ready to pounce. M just wants to be like other teenagers her age who always know what to say and what to do. So why does it feel like she lives on a different plane of existence to everyone else?

***M in the Middle: Secret Crushes, Mega-Colossal Anxiety and the People's Republic of Autism*** by the students of Limpsfield Grange

Life after diagnosis isn't easy for M. Back in her wobbly world, there are lots of changes and ups and downs to get used to, not just for M, but for her friends and family too. Faced with an exciting crush, a pushy friend and an unhelpful Headteacher, how long until the beast of anxiety pounces again?

***Camouflage: The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women*** by Dr Sarah Bargiela,

Time and time again, Autistic women are being missed out of diagnosis in early life. Autism is still considered to be a "male condition", thanks to biased diagnostic criteria. *Camouflage* is a graphic novel, illustrating the experiences of women diagnosed late in life; it's perfect for someone coming to terms with an autism diagnosis in their later years.

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***A Kind of Spark*** by Elle McNicoll

A neurodivergent girl campaigns for a memorial when she learns that her small Scottish town used to burn witches simply because they were different.

***Please Don't Hug Me*** by Kay Kerr

A funny-serious story about what happens when you stop trying to be the person other people expect you to be. Erin is looking forward to Schoolies, at least she thinks she is. But things are not going to plan. Life is getting messy, and for Erin, who is autistic, that's a big problem. She's lost her job at Surf Zone after an incident that clearly was not her fault. Her driving test went badly even though she followed the instructions perfectly. Her boyfriend is not turning out to be the romantic type. And she's missing her brother, Rudy, who left almost a year ago. But now that she's writing letters to him, some things are beginning to make just a tiny bit of sense.

***The Obsessive Joy of Autism*** by Julia Bascom

'Being autistic, to me, means a lot of different things, but one of the best things is that I can be so happy, so enraptured about things no one else understands and so wrapped up in my own joy that, not only does it not matter that no one else shares it, but it can become contagious. This is the part about autism that I can never explain. This is the part I never want to lose.'

Julia Bascom's depiction of the joy of autistic obsessions tells a story about autism that is very rarely told. It tells of a world beyond impairments and medical histories, where the multiples of seven can open a floodgate of untranslatable joy, where riding a train can make everything feel perfectly sized and full of light, and where flapping your hands *just so* amplifies everything you feel.

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## Online Documents

[Understanding Your Child's Autism Diagnosis](https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Digital-Resource-pack-2022.pdf) for parents and guardians of Autistic children. <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Digital-Resource-pack-2022.pdf>

## [Starting the Autism Journey](https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Starting-the-Autism-Journey.pdf)

<https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Starting-the-Autism-Journey.pdf>

It's Not Rocket Science

<https://www.ndti.org.uk/resources/publication/its-not-rocket-science>

Autism and Language – What's the Best Word <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Autism-Language.pdf>

## Online Webinars

[Autism: how anxiety affects everything - Sarah Hendrickx](https://youtu.be/rPD_yzMHJls)

[https://youtu.be/rPD\\_yzMHJls](https://youtu.be/rPD_yzMHJls)

Making sense of autism: Monotropism and the mind as an interest system

[https://youtu.be/KKhfp\\_ABjcm](https://youtu.be/KKhfp_ABjcm)

Double Empathy Podcast: Ep. 1 Part 1

<https://youtu.be/TY1FBvJpzW8>

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Self-Advocacy 101 with Tara Killen (Thriving Autistic)

[https://youtu.be/st5DzlvO\\_jw](https://youtu.be/st5DzlvO_jw)

What is Autism? recorded for AsIAM.ie

<https://youtu.be/lbHpRserbpw>

Middletown Centre for Autism (2020) Online Training Webinar – ‘Autism & Managing Anxiety’

[www.middletownautism.com/training-packages/joint/autism-and-managing-anxiety-post-primary-264-29-04-2020](http://www.middletownautism.com/training-packages/joint/autism-and-managing-anxiety-post-primary-264-29-04-2020)

### **Webpage Publications**

AsIAM – Creating a Quiet Space,

<https://asiam.ie/creating-a-quiet-space/>

CRESST – Conflict Resolution by Young People for Young People (2020)  
Restorative Approaches,

[www.cresst.org.uk/restorative-approaches/](http://www.cresst.org.uk/restorative-approaches/)

Resolving Conflict

[www.cresst.org.uk/youth-resolving-conflict/](http://www.cresst.org.uk/youth-resolving-conflict/)

Middletown Centre for Autism (2020) Setting Up A Sensory Lounge,

<https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies/setting-up-a-sensory-lounge/>

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- <sup>i</sup> National Council for Special Education 2016 [6 Press release ASD.pdf \(ncse.ie\)](#)
- <sup>ii</sup> Doyle, J. K. (2021, March). *Autistic Women & Girls 2021 Event 2: Co-occurring conditions*
- <sup>iii</sup> Dr Breda Friel, - Ulster University speaking at NYCI/MU seminar, Maynooth University, 2020
- <sup>iv</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY2ctCuTWPw&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY2ctCuTWPw&ab_channel=TEDxTalks)
- <sup>v</sup> Dr Breda Friel, - Ulster University speaking at NYCI/MU seminar , Maynooth University, 2020
- <sup>vi</sup> Dr Breda Friel, - Ulster University speaking at NYCI/MU seminar, Maynooth University, 2020
- <sup>vii</sup> Swedish Research carried out by the Karolinska Institute quoted in [People With Autism Tend to Die Younger \(webmd.com\)](#)
- <sup>viii</sup> Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The ‘double empathy problem’. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887. doi: [10.1080/09687599.2012.710008](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008)
- <sup>ix</sup> Van de Cruys, S., Evers, K., Van der Hallen, R., Van Eysen, L., Boets, B., de-Wit, L., & Wagemans, J. (2014). Precise minds in uncertain worlds: Predictive coding in autism. *Psychological Review*, 121(4), 649–675. doi: [10.1037/a0037665](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037665)
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Special reference to this resource which started and guided me on this journey and gave me a template from which to develop the final resource:

Youth Theatre Ireland: A Handbook for Youth Theatre Facilitators; Supporting Young People on the Autism Spectrum (2020),

This resource, developed by AsIAm and Youth Theatre Ireland, aims to equip youth theatre leaders with the information and strategies to build their confidence and develop facilitation skills that support the participation of Autistic young people

[www.youththeatre.ie/resources/supporting-young-people-on-the-autism-spectrum](http://www.youththeatre.ie/resources/supporting-young-people-on-the-autism-spectrum)

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