



# Information Sheet: *Understanding Autism*

Autism is a spectrum condition that affects people in different ways. ASD is a neurological and developmental disorder that influences how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Though autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is considered a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life. Recent data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests a prevalence of **1 in 36 children**.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, people with ASD often experience:

- Difficulty with communication and interaction with others
- Restricted interests and repetitive behaviors
- Symptoms that impact their ability to function in daily life

Like everyone, individuals with autism have their own strengths and challenges. Below are some common difficulties they may experience, including the key areas required for diagnosis.

## **Social Communication**

People with autism may have difficulty interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language, like gestures, facial expressions, or tone of voice. Some may be non-verbal or have limited speech, while others have strong language skills but struggle with sarcasm or tone of voice. Common challenges include:

- Taking things literally and struggling with abstract concepts
- Needing extra time to process information or respond to questions
- Repeating phrases or words (echolalia)

## **Social Interaction**

Autistic individuals may find it difficult to understand or ‘read’ others’ emotions and intentions and express their own feelings. This can make social situations challenging. For example, a person may:

- Appear insensitive or uninterested
- Seek time alone when overwhelmed by social interactions
- Struggle to form friendships or act in ways that seem socially inappropriate or unexpected

## **Repetitive and Restrictive Behavior**

Autistic people often prefer routines to help make the world feel more predictable. They may:

- Follow strict routines, like traveling the same route or eating the same food daily
- Engage in repetitive behaviors, such as hand-flapping or twirling objects, which may help them manage stress or anxiety
- Experience distress from changes in routine, such as holidays, school transitions, or even minor disruptions like a bus detour

Anxiety is common, particularly in social situations or when facing change, and it can deeply affect their quality of life.

## **Sensory Sensitivity**

Many autistic individuals experience heightened or reduced sensitivity to sounds, touch, light, taste, and other stimuli. For example, background noise that others can ignore may feel unbearably loud to someone with autism, leading to anxiety or discomfort. Sensitivity to touch might also cause them to avoid hugs, which can sometimes be misinterpreted.

Environments like schools, workplaces, and shopping centers can be overwhelming, but making small adjustments can help create autism-friendly spaces.

## **Meltdowns and Shutdowns**

When overwhelmed, an autistic person may experience a meltdown or shutdown.

- A meltdown is an intense reaction where the person temporarily loses behavioral control. This may involve verbal or physical outbursts, like shouting, crying, or lashing out.
- A shutdown is a passive response where the person may become silent or disengaged.

Both experiences are exhausting and misunderstood. For example, a meltdown in a child may be mistaken for a temper tantrum, leading to hurtful judgments from others. One autistic woman described having a shutdown as: 'just as frustrating as a meltdown, because of not being able to figure out how to react how I want to, or not being able to react at all; there isn't any 'figuring out' because the mind feels like it is past a state of being able to interpret.'

This handout provides an overview of ASD and some of the challenges people on the spectrum may experience. Understanding autism can help create more inclusive environments and support individuals to thrive in their own unique ways.