

**Supporting autistic  
young people  
to join Scouts:  
a guide for volunteers**



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It could be choosing the right food for backwoods cooking, turning your routine for a session into a visual plan, or helping someone turn their interest into an arm full of badges. This is the kind of support that helps autistic young people be part of Scouts.

To make sure autistic young people get the support they need, volunteers need to understand autism. At the same time, it's important to remember that all autistic people are individuals. To make sure that autistic young people can take part in sessions, you'll need to get to know each person, find out what will help them feel happy and confident in your group, and make any adjustments they might need.

We've created this booklet with the National Autistic Society, to help you ask questions and make changes so autistic young people can be full and valued members of Scouts. This doesn't always mean changing everything you do (although you'll probably need to make some adjustments), but it does mean treating people with respect, caring about their experiences, and working together to make things happen – all of which Scouts already do every day.

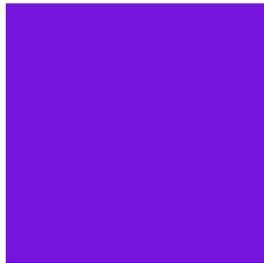
# What is autism



Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic people are autistic for life. Autism is not an illness or disease, and it can't be 'cured'.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain characteristics, but being autistic affects different people in different ways. Autism can have both positive and negative effects on someone's life.

Autistic people share diagnostic areas (such as having sensory sensitivities), but the ways these areas present are different for everyone. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues, or other conditions, so people need different levels of support.



# All autistic people have:

- **difficulties with social communication and interaction**
- **repetitive behaviours and a preference for routine**
- **special interests or an intense focus on interests that may be very important to them**
- **sensory sensitivities.**

The characteristics of autism vary from one person to another. It's often said that the differences that autistic girls experience present more subtly, or appear subtle to others. Some autistic girls mask their autism to try and hide the fact that they feel different; they may copy behaviour from others around them and can be exhausted by the constant effort to appear similar to others. They may also be unaware they're 'masking' in the first place. This subtler presentation of autism is a major barrier to professionals recognising autism and understanding the experiences of autistic women and girls. To find out more, check out [autism.org.uk/about/what-is/gender/stories](https://autism.org.uk/about/what-is/gender/stories).

This booklet explains a bit more about these shared characteristics, and gives you some tips about what might help.

# Social communication

Autistic people might struggle when interpreting language, whether it's verbal or non-verbal. They may have a very literal understanding of language, and think people mean exactly what they say. This might mean they find jokes, sarcasm, metaphors and abstract concepts hard to understand. Autistic people might also find it difficult to use or understand facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, and body language.

Some autistic young people may be viewed as trying to be the 'group's comedian' when they genuinely don't understand what's being asked of them. Other young people may find this situation funny, but it's confusing and upsetting for the autistic young person.

Some autistic young people have excellent language skills and vocabulary; they might still find it hard to understand the unwritten rules of conversation. For example, if a volunteer says 'we'll go to the park in two minutes', an autistic young person might wait and expect to go to the park in precisely two minutes' time. Autistic people might use complicated phrases they've heard somewhere else, or might simply repeat what someone's just said – this is called echolalia. They might talk at length about their own interests, without noticing if the person they're talking to is interested. Alternatively, autistic people might have limited speech – but this doesn't necessarily mean that they don't understand what's being said.

- Talk to parents and carers (and autistic young people themselves if appropriate), so you understand each young person's particular communication needs before they join.
- Speak clearly, in a consistent way.
- Try to avoid metaphors and colloquialisms (for example, it's raining cats and dogs) as these can be confusing and make people worry.

## What can help?

- Give young people plenty of time to process what's been said to them. It's useful to leave at least six seconds before expecting an answer.
- Always check people have understood what you've said – don't assume they have or haven't.
- Remember that some young people find it hard to make eye contact. This doesn't mean they're not listening, or that they're being rude. People may need to look somewhere else so they can concentrate on what's being said.
- For more information about supporting autistic young people and communication visit [autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating](https://autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating).

# Social interaction

Autistic people often find it difficult to recognise and understand other people's feelings and intentions. They might also find it hard to express their own emotions, and understand unwritten social rules. All of this can make it very hard to navigate the social world.

Autistic people might need time alone when they feel overloaded by other people. They might not seek comfort from other people when they are worried or upset, or it might seem like they're being socially inappropriate.

Autistic people might find it hard to make friends. Sometimes, autistic young people do want to interact with others and make friends, but they're unsure how to go about it. They might become easily offended if they misread a social situation and think that people dislike them, or they might be confused and worried by social situations, and be too scared to join in.

# What can help?



- Remember that autistic young people might need more support to make friends. Consider gently helping them to start a conversation or activity with other members of the group. You might be able to find a kind and reliable young person to be their 'buddy'.
- Remember that an autistic young person may not realise if what they're doing appears to be rude or inappropriate. They need understanding from supportive adults.
- For more information about supporting autistic people and social interaction visit [autism.org.uk/about/communication/social-children](https://autism.org.uk/about/communication/social-children).



# Repetitive behaviours and routines



The world can seem like a very unpredictable and confusing place if you're autistic. Lots of autistic people like to have a clear routine so they know what's going to happen.

Rules can also be important to autistic people – they might find it difficult to take a different approach to something once they've been taught the 'right' way to do it. Autistic people might not be comfortable with the idea of change, but they might be able to cope better if they can prepare for changes in advance.

Repetitive behaviour may include self-stimulating or 'stimming' behaviour. 'Stimming' behaviours can include arm or hand flapping, finger flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head banging, and complex body movements. People may also use an object repetitively (such as flicking a rubber band or twirling a piece of string), or repeat activities involving the senses (such as repeatedly feeling a particular texture).

Repetitive behaviour varies from person to person, but the reasons behind it may be similar, and may include:

- attempting to gain sensory input. For example, rocking may be a way to stimulate the balance system, while hand flapping may provide visual stimulation.
- attempting to reduce sensory input. For example, focusing on one particular sound may reduce the impact of a loud, distressing environment. This may be particularly likely in social situations.
- attempting to deal with stress and anxiety and block out uncertainty.
- passing time and providing enjoyment.

- Your sessions may already have some sort of routine. Try to make sure you stick to the same format as far as possible, and give the young person a visual plan of your usual routine.
- Let the young person know in advance what you'll be doing in each session.
- Give the young person as much notice as possible if there's a change to routine.

## What can help?

- If you are going somewhere new (for example, on a trip) help the young person to prepare in advance. Work with parents and carers (and the young person themselves, if appropriate) to decide how to do this. For example, would looking at photos of where you're going help? Would it be best to visit with a parent or carer before the trip? Do they need extra support for this trip to help them manage the change?
- If you're planning an overnight camping trip, it's especially important to work with parents and carers (and the young person themselves, if appropriate) to decide how to best support the young person. It might help to give them clear information about the timetable for the trip and the routine for each day. Check what food the young person would be most comfortable with, as many autistic people like to eat the same food each day. Check if they have any particular bedtime routines that they'll need to follow, and find out if there are any familiar objects they'd like to bring from home to help them feel more comfortable.
- For more information about supporting autistic people and change visit [autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/preparing-for-change](https://autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/preparing-for-change).

# Interests

Many autistic people have intense interests; some people call these 'special' interests. They can change over time, or they can be lifelong. Special interests can be about anything from arts to music, or trains to computers; they may sometimes be unusual. These interests are usually a source of great happiness and pleasure: they're not something to be ridiculed or removed.

## What can help?

- Make sure you know what the young person's intense interest is.
- If another young person in the group likes the same thing, introduce them and help them start to chat about it.
- Try to include their interest in a group activity. This would be especially great during their first session.
- Try to find a way to link their interest to a badge or award, as this may encourage them to take part.

# Sensory sensitivity

Autistic young people might also experience **over or under sensitivity** to sound, touch, taste, smell, light, colour, temperature, pain, balance, or body awareness. For example, they might find certain background sounds (which other people ignore or block out) unbearably loud or distracting. Being in crowded places or being knocked into may cause great anxiety or stress. Sometimes sensory sensitivities can even cause physical pain.

Autistic people might also seek out sensory stimulation, for example, they may be fascinated by lights or spinning objects. They may engage in 'stimming' such as flapping their hands, rocking, or jumping up and down – this can be a sign of excitement or sensory overload.



# What can help?



- Make sure you understand a young person's sensory profile (what they're sensitive to) before they join your section.
- Ask if the young person has any 'stimming behaviours' and what they mean for them. For example, for one young person hand flapping may mean they're excited, while for someone else it may mean they're anxious.
- Think about the lighting in your meeting place. If it's overly bright (for example, if it's strip lighting) is there any way it can be softened?
- Think about making a quiet break out area with comfy seats, where the young person can go if they need a break from the group.
- When planning any trips, think about sensory issues, for example whether it could be crowded, smelly, or noisy. Can you make plans so the young person can have a quiet break if they need to?
- For more information about supporting autistic people and sensory differences visit [autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world](https://autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world).



# Stress and anxiety

These difficulties mean that autistic young people are often prone to stress and anxiety. This can mean that they become stressed or anxious in situations others don't find difficult. Sometimes autistic people behave in unexpected ways when they're stressed or anxious. They may shout and get angry, retreat into themselves, or try to run away.

# What can help?

- Find out what things make the young person stressed or anxious, and how they react to those things.
- Know what the young person needs you to do when they feel that way.
- If the young person is prone to running away, make sure that your meeting place is safe.
- For more information about how autistic young people experience stress and anxiety and how to support them visit [autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns](https://autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns).

## Masking

Some autistic young people 'mask' their difficulties when they're with others, particularly if they worry about being different or getting into trouble. This means that they might not behave differently, so you may not be able to tell if they're feeling stressed or anxious. This takes a great emotional toll on the young person, and it can result in even more anxiety and distress (which is often shown when they return home). It's important to talk to parents and carers to find out if a young person masks their difficulties or hides how they are feeling. If they do, think about any situations they might find difficult or stressful, and put appropriate support in place to make things easier for them.

## Sharing a diagnosis

Make sure you know whether the young person knows about their diagnosis, and whether they're happy to talk about it. It's also important to check how they feel about other people in the group knowing about their diagnosis: they may not want anyone else to know, or they may want to tell others about it. This all depends on the individual, and their wishes must be respected.

## A word about language

Over the years, different terms have been used for autism. Research from 2015 suggests that there is no one term that everyone prefers.

It's important to check with the young person and their family about the language they use to talk about their diagnosis. For example, some autistic young people who join Scouts may have already been given a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, and they may prefer to use this term when talking about their diagnosis.

## More information

The National Autistic Society has more information about autism online:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/others/activity-sports.aspx>

They also made a video Q&A with Niall Aslam for World Autism Awareness Week:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td3MeXs3RDE>

## **Get in touch**

We're always happy to help.

Contact us at

**[communications@scouts.org.uk](mailto:communications@scouts.org.uk)**

[facebook.com/scoutassociation](https://facebook.com/scoutassociation)

[instagram.com/scouts/](https://instagram.com/scouts/)

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