# What Is Autism?

*Understanding autism as a spectrum – and why it looks different in every person*

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

## What is autism?

### A lifelong neurodevelopmental difference

It affects how a person communicates, interacts with others, experiences the world around them, and processes information.

Autism is not an illness or a disease, and it cannot be "cured" – it is a different way of thinking, communicating, and experiencing the world that a person is born with and lives with throughout their life.

## Why it is called a "spectrum"

### A unique profile, not a straight line

Autism affects each person differently and to differing degrees. It is not a line from "a little autistic" to "very autistic" – it is a unique profile of strengths, differences, and support needs across several areas, which can also change over time and across situations. This is why two autistic people can seem very different from one another, while both are genuinely autistic.

## Core areas of difference

### Social communication and interaction

Differences in understanding or using verbal and non-verbal communication, reading social cues, or building and maintaining relationships.

### Restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests, or activities

Including a preference for routine and predictability, intense or focused interests, and repetitive movements or "stimming".

### Sensory differences

Being more or less sensitive than others to light, sound, touch, taste, smell, movement, or internal body signals (see our separate fact sheet on sensory differences).

## A note on language

### Identity-first language

Many autistic people and organisations prefer "autistic person" over "person with autism", though preferences vary between individuals.

### The double empathy problem

Difficulties in communication between autistic and non-autistic people go in both directions – it is a mutual difference in perspective, not simply a deficit on the autistic person's side.

### A neurodiversity-affirming approach

Frames autism as a natural variation in how human brains work, while recognising that autistic people can be genuinely disabled by a world designed around non-autistic norms.

## Autism looks different in different people

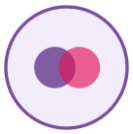
There is no single "type" of autistic person, and no two autistic people present in exactly the same way. Autism can look very different depending on a person's age, gender, communication style, co-occurring conditions, cultural background, and environment. Some autistic people are chatty and articulate; others are non-speaking or use alternative communication. Some have intense sensory sensitivities; others seek out sensory input. Some need significant daily support; others live independently and may only need support at certain times or in certain situations.

### Masking or camouflaging

Many autistic people, often especially women and girls, learn to consciously or unconsciously hide or suppress autistic traits in order to fit in socially. This takes a great deal of effort and can lead to exhaustion, anxiety, or burnout, and can also mean autism is missed or diagnosed much later in life.

### Gender differences

Because early research and diagnostic tools were largely based on boys, autistic girls and women are more likely to be under-recognised or misdiagnosed with other conditions first, even though the underlying traits are just as real.



### Co-occurring conditions

Autism often occurs alongside other conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, learning disabilities, or epilepsy, which can shape how autism presents in that individual.

### Presentation can vary across settings

For example, someone may cope well at school through masking, then experience meltdowns or shutdowns once home, in a safe space, where they can finally let their guard down.

## What autism is not

- It is not caused by parenting, upbringing, vaccines, or diet
- It is not a mental illness, and it is not something a person "catches" or develops later in response to an event
- **It is not the same as having low intelligence –** autistic people have the full range of intellectual ability
- **It does not mean a lack of empathy –** autistic people typically feel empathy, though it may be expressed or experienced differently

> **Remember**
> Because autism looks different in every autistic person, it is best understood by getting to know the individual – their own communication style, sensory needs, strengths, and support needs – rather than relying on assumptions or a single stereotype of what autism "looks like".