



Autism and other conditions

More than half of the people on the autism spectrum have 4 or more other conditions (Soke et al. 2018), including:

- medical problems such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal issues or sleep disorders
- developmental diagnoses such as global developmental delay, intellectual disability or language delay
- mental health conditions such as anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder or depression, or neurodevelopmental conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- genetic conditions including fragile X syndrome and tuberous sclerosis complex.

The language of autism

When referring to themselves, some learners prefer identity first language, some prefer people first language and some use the terms interchangeably. It's important to check with each learner and their family to determine how they would like to be identified, for example autistic, autistic learner, learner with autism, learner who has autism.

Many individuals and organisations refer to autism as a neurodevelopmental difference and not a disability or disorder. This is intentional and is used to reinforce the fact that a neurodivergent brain is not a disordered brain or one that works 'incorrectly', but a brain that works in a different way that has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Impacts of autism on learning

In a learning environment, a learner with autism can:

- seem inflexible or have difficulty switching focus to new activities (between learning activities and between learning and break times)
- have difficulty with social communication and social interactions
- have their independent learning impacted by their organisation and planning difficulties
- understand and use language literally
- have restrictive or repetitive behaviours
- be highly impacted by sensory inputs.

Strengths of learners with autism

The strengths of learners with autism can be:

- attention to detail and observational skills
- concentration that is free from distraction
- an extraordinary memory
- expertise in particular areas of interest
- unique thought processes that support innovative solutions
- integrity, tenacity and acceptance of difference.

