

# It's Okay to be Different

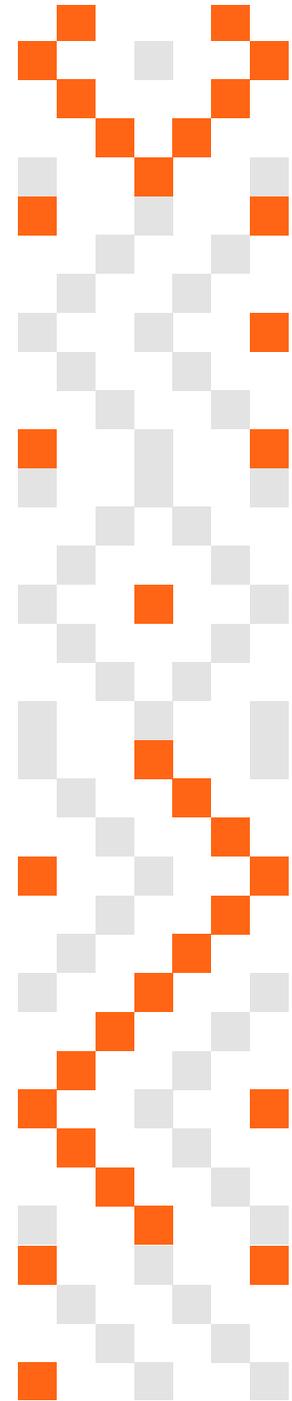


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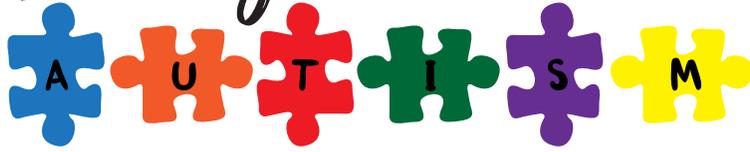
## What is autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

'Autism' is the term used to describe a variety of neurological problems that affect thought, perception and attention (Aarons & Gittens, 1992; Durig, 2005; Peeters & Gillberg, 1999; De Clercq 2006; Jones, 2002). It can result in a block, delay or distortion of signals from the eyes, ears and other sensory organs, affecting taste, touch and smell, resulting in barriers to a person's ability to interact with other people, either through social activity or using communication skills such as speech (Hart, 1993). Also limiting abilities such as imagination and reasoning, the signs of autism first appear as developmental delays. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV-TR), it is classified under pervasive development disorders, whilst Autism South Africa and the National Autistic Society in the United Kingdom (UK) subscribe to the understanding that it is a "developmental disability" (Aarons & Gittens, 1992; Peeters & Gillberg, 1999) because it interferes with the rate or sequence of childhood development and affects a person's 'functioning' across his or her lifespan. Autism is now given a single diagnosis under neurodevelopmental disorders as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), according to the new criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), individuals living with autism could display impairments in social interaction, communication, and behavioural repertoires that occur on a continuum of impairment from mild to severe (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Autism is classified as a 'spectrum' disorder due to the wide variety of symptoms and the variations in the severity of the symptoms each individual experiences. "As with other developmental disabilities the condition usually lasts a lifetime but that does not mean the person cannot learn (Hart, 1993). The implications for education for children with special education needs are wide-ranging and captured by authors such as Farrel (2003), Tilstaon and Layton (2004), and Holland (2005)," Soni (2013). Autism spectrum disorder per the US National Institute of Mental Health (2022) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how an individual learns, communicates, interacts with others and behaves based on the unique way in which the individuals brain grows, structures and develops and the various treatments and services available can assist with the symptoms and daily functioning of an individual. In South Africa there are examples of excellence relating to autism screening, diagnosis, treatments and services, however, autism remains a diagnosis that is not made early enough when compared with the diagnosis in some other countries. An early diagnosis means that an individual is assisted with interventions early in life. Ongoing awareness-raising is needed and teachers and other professionals working with children should be able to screen for autism in order that an individual can get a relevant and appropriate diagnosis so that treatment and related services can be provided. More public awareness is also needed in South Africa so that there is less stigma and bias towards people living with autism. Parents and communities must be educated on autism so that families who have individuals living with autism can be supported across various systems as proposed by Bronfenbrenner, 2004, that is, across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.



The Future  
Reimagined

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## What are the signs and symptoms of ASD?

The US National Institute of Mental Health (2022), <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism-spectrum-disorder>, provides a list of some examples that can be observed in individuals diagnosed with ASD. The list is included here to raise awareness:

### Social communication and social interaction behaviors displayed, may include:

- Making little or inconsistent eye contact
- Appearing not to look at or listen to people who are talking
- Infrequently sharing interest, emotion, or enjoyment of objects or activities (including infrequently pointing at or showing things to others)
- Not responding or being slow to respond to one's name or to other verbal bids for attention
- Having difficulties with the back and forth of conversation
- Often talking at length about a favorite subject without noticing that others are not interested or without giving others a chance to respond
- Displaying facial expressions, movements, and gestures that do not match what is being said
- Having an unusual tone of voice that may sound singsong or flat and robot-like
- Having trouble understanding another person's point of view or being unable to predict or understand other people's actions
- Difficulties adjusting behavior to different social situations
- Difficulties sharing in imaginative play or in making friends

### Restrictive/repetitive behaviors displayed, may include:

- Repeating certain behaviors or having unusual behaviors, such as repeating words or phrases (a behavior called echolalia)
- Having a lasting intense interest in specific topics, such as numbers, details, or facts
- Showing overly focused interests, such as with moving objects or with parts of objects
- Becoming upset by slight changes in a routine and having difficulty with transitions
- Being more sensitive or less sensitive than other people to sensory input, such as light, sound, clothing, or temperature People with ASD also may experience sleep problems and irritability.

### Individuals living with autism spectrum disorder also may have many strengths, including:

- Being able to learn things in detail and remember information for long periods of time
- Being strong visual and auditory learners
- Excelling in math, science, music, or art

