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Understanding diversity

The term 'neurodiversity' is often used to describe the natural variation in the way an individual's brain functions. It refers to the differences in the way people behave, and how they experience, understand and interact with the world around them.

As each individual is different, the term 'neurodiverse' applies to everyone, including 'neurotypical' people. The term 'neurotypical' simply refers to a person with a more common type of brain (also known as a neurotype) in terms of how they sense the world and people around them, and how they think, feel and respond. When you are neurodivergent, you differ from the 'typical' or more common type of brain. Autistic people are neurodivergent, as are people with [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#) (ADHD) or [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#) (OCD), or with learning differences such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. About 1 in every 5 or 6 children has variations in their brain development ([raisingchildren.net.au](#), 2022).

Video: Understanding neurodiversity and autism

When referring to neurodivergence, disability advocates encourage the use of inclusive and non-judgmental language. Some disability advocacy organisations suggest that person-first language (for example, 'a student who has autism') is the preferred way to address disability. Research indicates that a large proportion of the autistic community prefer identity-first language (for example, 'an autistic student'). It is helpful to speak to a student's family about their preferred choice of language rather than making any assumptions.

What are characteristics of autism?

No two students on the autism spectrum present in the same way. Autism is described as a spectrum, which means that individuals are likely to have a different profile of strengths and needs in various areas of functioning.

Signs and behaviours of autism are often present before the age of 3. However, characteristics of autism may not be detected until a child starts primary school. Young children may experience difficulties adjusting to the school environment and new social situations. The transition to school might feel quite overwhelming for the child.

Some of the [indicators of autism](#) [PDF] might include delays in communication, narrow interests, lack of social interaction or interest in other people (which may include reduced eye contact with others), emotional regulation difficulties, sensory sensitivities and repetitive behaviours.

However, autistic students may also present with exceptional strengths, which can be incorporated into learning activities at school. Common strengths include:

- strong visual skills and ability to pay attention to detail
- problem-solving and logical thinking skills
- memory skills
- hyperlexia (ability to decode written language at an early age)
- good understanding of and adherence to rules

- special interests in particular topics
- ability to focus and pay attention for extended periods
- exceptional honesty, reliability and loyalty.

Video: My lived experience: What it means to be autistic

What is a 'co-occurring' condition?

In some cases, an autistic child may also be diagnosed with another condition. When one or more conditions occur together, they are referred to as co-occurring or co-existing conditions. Co-occurring conditions are more common in neurodivergent children than in the general population and can be present from early childhood or may not present or be diagnosed until adolescence or adulthood.

Some common co-occurring conditions seen in autistic children may include language delay speech disorder, developmental language disorder, anxiety, ADHD and motor difficulties. Find out more about conditions that can [occur with autism](#).

Not all autistic students have or develop a co-occurring condition. However, if you notice a behaviour change, a regression in their skills, or feel they are not responding as expected to the supports in place at school, it is important to discuss this with the student's family. The family may have noticed similar behaviours at home. Discussing your concerns with the family will help you to make appropriate adjustments to help the student access learning at school. You may also recommend that the family follows up with a health professional if the student seems to be showing signs of another undiagnosed condition alongside autism.

What does 'twice exceptional' mean?

The term 'twice exceptional' is used to refer to individuals who are both neurodivergent and gifted. Twice-exceptional students are likely to perform inconsistently at school, presenting with uneven skills and asynchronous development (that is, abilities that are developing at different rates). Having an awareness of twice-exceptionality may enable you to help these students to succeed at school.

A twice-exceptional student may demonstrate the following characteristics:

- significant creativity in one or more areas
- hypersensitivity to sounds, tastes, smells, etc
- perfectionistic traits
- superior critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- strong sense of curiosity
- high-level abstract thinking
- difficulty with the development of early reading and writing skills due to deficits in cognitive processing
- low self-esteem
- underdeveloped social skills
- strong ability to concentrate deeply in areas of interest
- behavioural issues due to underlying stress, boredom, under-stimulation, or lack of motivation.

- Teachers can support twice-exceptional students by making adjustments that acknowledge their individual learning needs. These can include:
- nurturing their strengths and interests, using their strengths to plan learning and teaching sequences
- supporting their social and emotional development
- identifying gaps in their learning and finding ways to support any relative weaknesses.

Every young person with autism has very different strengths, and so each one of those young people need to be recognised and acknowledged for what it is that they can bring to their schooling life, to their peers, to their teachers, and to their communities.

— Vicky Booth, Director of Disability Inclusion Student Services Branch, Queensland Department of Education

What if my student does not have a diagnosis?

If you believe a student is showing signs of being neurodivergent, it is important that you first discuss your observations with the school support team. Collectively, you can decide on the best way to raise your concerns with the student's family. Your discussions with the family must focus on observations of the student's presenting behaviours, challenges and strengths, and ways you might support the student at school. Focusing on observations opens the way for transparent conversations around topics that families may find sensitive.

Importantly, as an educator, you are not qualified to, nor are you expected to, diagnose a child with a disability. However, you and the school support team may [impute](#) that a disability exists one of four categories: physical, sensory, cognitive or social/emotional. This means you believe, based on reasonable grounds and supported by documented evidence, that the student has an undiagnosed disability as defined by the [Disability Standards for Education 2005](#) that has a functional impact on their capacity to access and participate in learning on the same basis as their peers. For more information, go to the **Schools' obligations to students with disability** topic.

The school support team may determine that there is a need to provide further supports for the student. Before making any educational adjustments, it is advisable to meet with the student's family to discuss your concerns and to co-plan appropriate adjustments. The family could display mixed emotions in the meeting. They might feel a sense of relief that you share their concerns, or it may come as a surprise to them that their child is not adjusting to school as expected. For more information go to the **Discussing observations** topic.

More information and guidelines about the assessment and diagnosis process can be found on the [Autism CRC website](#).

In some instances, the family may not engage with the school about the need for educational adjustments or not agree with the school's observations regarding the student. In these cases, it is still in the best interests of the student to support their learning in the most appropriate way, as determined by the school support team. The school must still make reasonable adjustments to support the student to access education on the same basis as their peers.