

www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/parents/starting-school

Understanding diversity

What is neurodiversity?

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.

No single person can be neurodiverse – that's a common misuse of the term. Everyone is different from others, so everyone is neurodiverse, including neurotypical people. The term 'neurotypical' simply refers to a person with a more common type of brain (otherwise 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).

Autistic people are not broken or disordered, they are just different, and may have additional support needs. When we understand and make allowances for neurodiversity, children are less likely to experience difficulties at school and more likely reach their full potential.

Video: Understanding neurodiversity and autism

Communicate to your school and teachers the language you and your child prefer to use – such as 'neurodivergent', 'autistic', 'on the spectrum', or 'with autism'. Note that most autistic adults prefer the term 'autistic', as it is part of who they are, and seen as part of their identity. You cannot remove autism from a person – autism is part of who a person is.

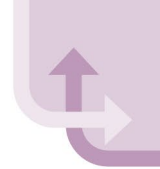
How does autism present in children?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability and can present in different ways as a child matures. It is generally associated with differences in the way a person learns, thinks, communicates and behaves. An autistic child may have a wide range of strengths, interests, abilities, needs and challenges.

Every autistic child is different. Some may have communication difficulties that prevent them from expressing their needs and feelings in ways others do. They may also have challenging behaviour that places them at risk and impacts their safety and wellbeing at home and at school. Some children also have restricted interests or display repetitive or highly focused behaviours.

Autistic children may have average IQ, or be academically gifted. They may be able to communicate effectively but experience other social challenges, such as with learning to play with other children or understanding the perspectives of others.

Some autistic children may be constantly conscious of sensations that other children are not aware of (for example, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, visual stimuli). On the other hand, they



might not notice sensations inside their bodies, such as hunger or pain, in the same way their peers do.

There is considerable variation in the way autistic children's brains work. For this reason, it is important that a child is provided with individualised support to help them access and participate in learning at school, and feel a sense of belonging.

Video: What are some myths associated with autism?

In summary, autistic children may act in a different way to other children including showing some indicators of autism [PDF].

However, autistic children may also have exceptional strengths, including:

- strong visual skills and ability to pay attention to detail
- problem-solving and logical thinking skills
- advanced memory skills
- hyperlexia (ability to read and understand 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 long periods
- exceptional honesty, reliability and loyalty
- ability to focus and pay attention for long periods.

You just need to stop looking at everything as being a deficit, because everything, nearly everything, that could be a deficit can also be a strength.

— Kathy Isaacs, autistic advocate and parent of autistic children

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 may occur at different times in an autistic person's life and have differing impacts on the way they behave and learn. 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.

Although your child may not develop a co-existing condition, if you notice a change in their behaviour or feel that they are not responding to the supports in place at school, it is important to discuss this with your child's school. This will help the school to make the appropriate adjustments to help your child to access learning at school. The school can provide support to your child even if they don't have a formal diagnosis of a disability.

You can take the following steps if you have concerns about your child:

- Let their teacher know about any changes you have noticed at home and establish whether these are also happening at school.
- Meet with the school support team to discuss and decide on supports that might benefit your child. This might include gathering further information about your child before making any decisions. The school might suggest that they collect information through school-based tests or classroom observations.

- Arrange a follow-up meeting to talk about the school's recommended next steps. If necessary, discuss your concerns with your GP or paediatrician.

For more information go to the **Talking to your child's teacher** topic below on the **Families** page.

How is autism diagnosed in children of this age?

Signs and behaviours of autism are often present before a child is 3 years old but might not be detected until a child starts primary school. You may notice that your child is not adjusting to the school environment as expected. Your child's school might also make similar observations or might not even be aware that your child is finding adjusting to school difficult because your child might behave differently at school and at home.

If you or your child's school suspect that your child might be showing signs of autism, the next step is to consider a formal assessment. The school may suggest that you make an appointment with your GP who can begin the process of referring you to the appropriate health professional.

Sometimes a team of professionals is required to make a diagnosis together. This involves a comprehensive assessment of your child's family and medical history, and developmental and functional abilities. An autism assessment will also generally consider your child's behaviour, their strengths, differences from other children, and challenges they are experiencing at home and at school.

More information and guidelines about the assessment and diagnosis process can be found on the Autism CRC website.

How can I embrace my child's neurodivergence?

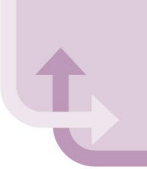
Embracing your child's neurodivergence involves acceptance, awareness, inclusion and appreciation.

What autism is for someone who never knew and never was exposed to autism before, [it] is just the autistic person's brain probably wired a little bit different to ours. There's nothing wrong with them. There's nothing to fix. But all we need to do is just to help [our son] to live a fantastic and independent and happy life.

— Vasily Shchegolev, parent of an autistic child

Select each title to view the information in the table below.

<p>Awareness</p>	<p>You are going to learn a lot about autism, including understanding your child's particular strengths and needs. You will also learn about the school's obligations in relation to supporting students with disability. You may need to act on behalf of your child to inform the school about your child's support needs and to ensure they are included as a valued member of the school community.</p> <p>Maintaining positive and open relationships with members of the school support team will help your child to achieve the best learning outcomes. You might need to be proactive and diplomatic when raising awareness of your child's needs. The best outcomes are achieved when families and schools work together to support children with diverse learning needs.</p>
-------------------------	--



Acceptance	<p>Learning about your child’s autism diagnosis is a significant moment in your life. It might take a little while to process what this means for your child and family. You might worry about the impact of the diagnosis on your child’s schooling.</p> <p>Your child might behave differently to other children and that is totally fine. They shouldn’t be expected to change their behaviours if it doesn’t interfere with their everyday activities.</p> <p>Your child’s school and health professionals will be able to provide you with information to help you understand more about autism and to learn about the support available for your child. It is likely you will face some challenges as your child grows up but there is a lot of support available to help make your child’s schooling experience positive and enjoyable.</p>
Appreciation	<p>Your child has many skills and abilities that can be celebrated. Your child’s school support team can work with you to identify these strengths and find opportunities for your child to use or demonstrate them at school.</p> <p>It can be helpful for children to understand that, although they can’t be great at everything, they are likely to have skills that are ‘their thing’! This might be something like having a fantastic memory, amazing creativity, or incredible maths skills.</p>
Inclusion	<p>There are likely to be other children in your child’s class at school who might also learn or act differently. Your child’s teacher and school will be familiar with how to support the unique strengths and needs of all children.</p> <p>Tasks and activities at school can be adjusted so your child can fully participate. The school support team will be able to work with you and your child to find ways to make sure your child feels supported and included.</p>