

AUTISM GLOSSARY

What are the latest definitions of autism terms? What are the words and phrases that show respect for the autistic community? Refer to this autistic-approved autism glossary of terms and list of acceptable language when talking or writing about autism.

autism spectrum disorder:

a neurological and developmental condition involving a wide range of delays, difficulties, and differences related to social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviors.

neurodiversity:

the concept that differences in brain “wiring” -- including conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia -- are not defective but the result of natural variation in the human genome. Atypical thinking styles are recognized as valuable sources of insight, creativity and innovation.

disability:

a condition of the mind or body that necessitates additional support or accommodations in daily life. Disability is more than a diagnosis -- it is the complex web of social and cultural barriers created by a society that was not designed for those with atypical brains and bodies.

disabled:

a form of identity-first language commonly used by those who view disability as a neutral trait.

Asperger syndrome or Asperger’s Syndrome:

previously considered a distinct form of autism defined by normal IQ and lack of early speech delay. Today, individuals with these traits are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Although it’s no longer used in new cases, many people who were originally diagnosed with Asperger’s continue to use it as a marker of community and personal identity.

developmental disability:

a group of lifelong disabilities beginning in childhood that cause delays or limitations in areas such as learning, mobility, communication, self-care, and overall independence.

stimming:

repetitive sounds, words, or movements (i.e., spinning, rocking, humming) that create sensory input as a means of self-soothing.

sensory processing:

the brain’s ability to take in raw sensory input from the environment and create meaning out of it.

meltdown:

a sudden, intense emotional release caused by a buildup of overwhelming anxiety, emotion, or sensory experiences. Meltdowns and tantrums are fundamentally different in that a tantrum is an attempt to manipulate, while a meltdown is outside the person’s control.

functioning labels:

a means of splitting the autism spectrum into a “high-functioning” group and a “low-functioning” group. Intended as a simple way to describe an individual, functioning labels are harmful in practice because they write off the needs of some and abilities of others, limiting access to both services and education opportunities.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP):

a document detailing the personalized educational goals and supports for students who receive special education services.

self-advocate:

a person with a disability who speaks up about their wishes, needs, and rights. Some self-advocates take on a public role in order to educate others about their condition and/or promoting disability rights.

presume competence:

the belief that, with the right supports in place, every individual has the capacity to understand and potential to succeed. Often used in the context of supporting those with limited or no speech: Those who have found success with alternative methods of communication often describe a disconnect between their minds and bodies. “Presume competence” summarizes their conviction that lack of speech should not be viewed as a sign of low intelligence—it is safer to assume they have not found a method of communication that meets their needs.

ableism:

discrimination on the basis of disability. In some cases, ableism is overt, such as the denial of life-saving organ transplants and the vast rates of unemployment among autistic adults. Ableist attitudes are often more-subtle, but they are pervasive in our society.

- Many organizations highlight the voices of professionals and family members over those of disabled people, resulting in fundraising and other advocacy campaigns that work against the goals of those they purport to serve.
- News stories about typical kids who have disabled friends or prom dates turn friendship into an act of charity. They suggest that it takes an unusually kind person with unique skills to love/befriend a disabled person.
- Stories that portray someone as inspirational solely because of their disability reinforce harmful ideas—that life with a disability is inherently difficult and unhappy, that disabled people are “not like us,” and that their lives less worth living.

ABA therapy:

a controversial form of behavior therapy developed by Ivar Lovaas, who believed that teaching autistic children to behave like their typical peers will make them less autistic. Young children spend up to 40 hours per week under a rigid reward-and-punishment system. Autistic adults who underwent intensive ABA as children report lasting harm from programs that prioritize normalization at the expense of play and leisure time, personal autonomy, and emotional well-being.

hidden curriculum:

the implicit rules and motives underlying social situations. While neurotypical people learn these through experience, autistic people often struggle to pick up on, apply, and make sense of these unspoken rules.

Autism Words and Phrases to Avoid

(And a Better Way to Say Them)

The way we talk about autism has a significant impact on how we view autism and how well we understand autistic people. Much of our current language comes from medical and educational circles — with little to no input from the people they serve. Other terms have become problematic over time as words shift in meaning and views on disability evolve.

The words we choose can be the difference between silencing the voices of autistic people and empowering them to lead conversations about their needs, their rights, and the way society views them.

The following terms reflect the preferences of most self-advocates, but they should not be viewed as the only acceptable options. In one-on-one interactions, allies to the autistic community can show respect by deferring to the language preferences of that individual.

AVOID USING	BETTER WAY TO SAY
Symptoms of autism — defines autism based solely on deficits	Signs of autism or autistic traits
Retarded — an offensive and demeaning term no longer accepted in education, medicine, legal documents, or informal interactions	Intellectual disability
Handicapped — an outdated term that describes the way disabled people were ostracized to the point that they had to hold out their caps and beg to survive	Disabled
Differently-abled or special needs — used as a substitute for disabled by those who consider it an offensive word; self-advocates believe euphemisms add to stigma by presenting disability as a topic that should be avoided or talked around	Disability or disabled
Autism Awareness — a widespread campaign that promotes autism as a tragedy and autistic people as a drain on society	Autism Acceptance
Suffers from autism — adds to stigma by inaccurately implying that autism makes for a lesser life experience	Autistic or on the autism spectrum
Affected by autism or living with autism — often used by writers and speakers who believe these terms to be neutral, these terms have the same connotations as person-first language: they falsely imply that autism is a separate entity when, in reality, the way the brain is wired is part of how the person experiences the world.	On the autism spectrum or on the spectrum

Autism glossary researched and written by self-advocate Lydia Wayman.