

Invited to Belong

Autism

Condition:

Autistic children and young people are often greatly misunderstood. Many people's experience of Autistic children is limited to observing them having what is commonly termed as a 'meltdown', or being seemingly unwilling to engage with others or the programme being provided. Negative labels such as 'challenging', 'behavioural issues' or 'uncooperative' are commonly used and Autistic children can be mistakenly regarded as being 'naughty' and their families of having 'poor parenting skills'. This narrative is wrong, and comes from a lack of real knowledge about Autism.

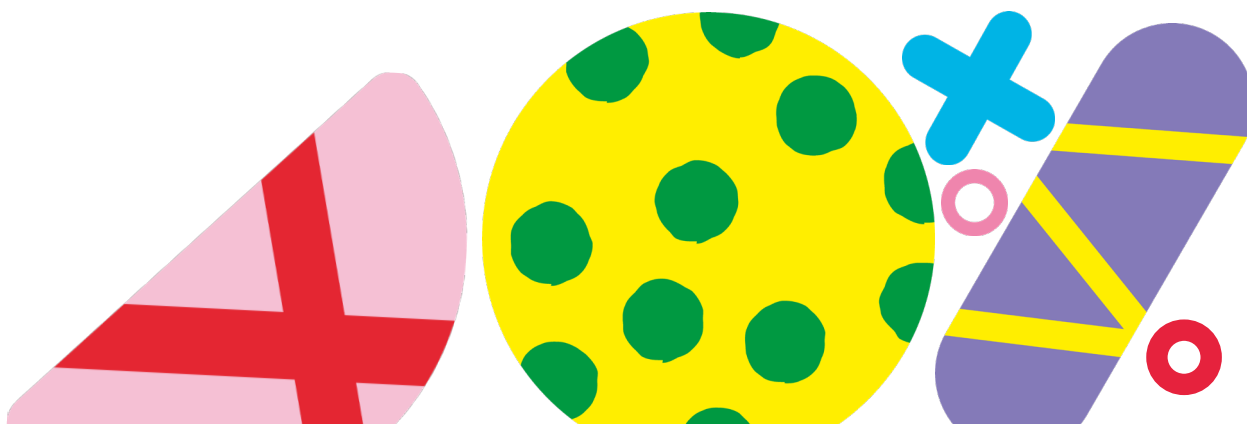
There is a preference among Autistic people for positive, identity first language, i.e. 'Autistic person' rather than 'person with Autism', as shown by language research carried out by the National Autistic Society, for example. Autistic people themselves generally identify as being neurodivergent (or neurodiverse), which means that their brain is 'wired' differently; they understand, experience and interact with the world around them in different ways to non-Autistic people and that difference isn't better or worse, it's just different. Figures vary regarding how many children and young people are Autistic but recent studies by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland suggest that it could be as many as 1 in 22. In understanding these differences, we can understand that a non-Autistic world can make life very difficult for Autistic children and young people.

Problem Areas:

A 'meltdown' isn't an Autistic young person being 'badly behaved', it isn't them 'pushing boundaries' or 'being difficult'. It is a brain overload, like a storm engulfing their brain, and it isn't something that they can do much about in that moment, but there is plenty that we can do to help and support them.

Each child is different and will have their own sensory profile, including things that they are over (hyper) sensitive to or under (hypo) sensitive to. Understanding these sensory differences helps us to support the children and young people that we care for to avoid sensory triggers, or if this isn't possible then to provide ways to reduce their impact e.g. ear defenders for loud noise, or sunglasses for bright or flickering light, and to identify a peaceful nearby rest area for if we see them starting to become overwhelmed.

Autistic children and young people can crave consistency and routine. They need to know what to expect and what is expected of them, helping them to be confident that nothing is going to surprise or overwhelm them. Changes to a programme, especially





at short notice, can be very hard to cope with as it can create anxiety about being overwhelmed or may lead to a brain overload.

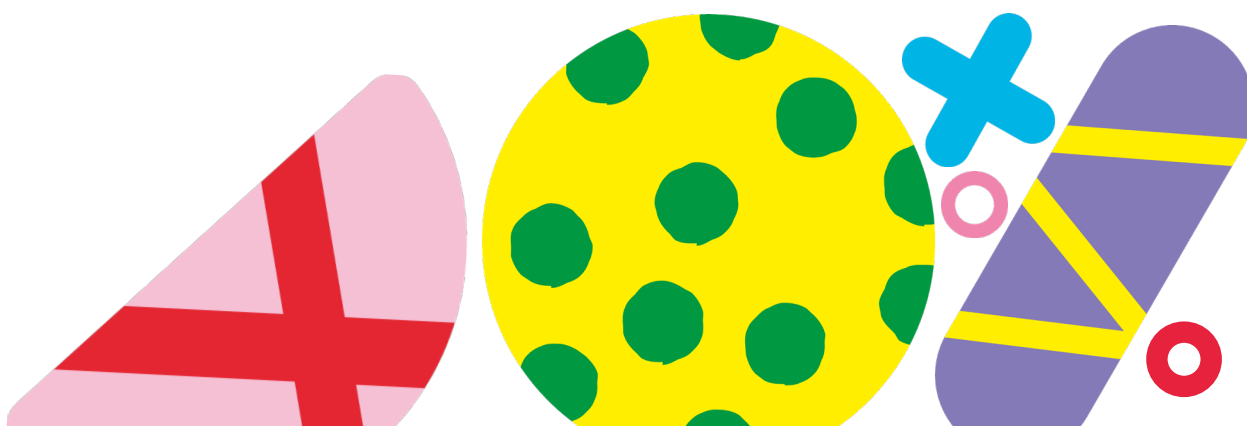
Another form of brain overload is a 'shutdown'. An Autistic child or young person may be unable to speak or move, standing, sitting or lying still, as a response to being overloaded. It can be just as powerful as a 'meltdown' and affect an Autistic young person just as profoundly, while being less obvious to anyone else.

It is likely to take an Autistic child or young person a while to fully recover from a brain overload, whatever the trigger. The more visible aspects of a brain overload might seem to be over after a short while, but it can affect a child or young person for up to the rest of the day. Being there with them, reassuring them, helps them to know that they are safe and cared for. Letting them rest gives them the time and space they need to fully recover. We can then look to learn from the experience together, understanding and seeking ways where possible to identify and minimise the trigger that caused the brain overload from affecting them again.

A great way to understand brain overloads better is to talk with Autistic adults about their experiences of them, what strategies they have put in place to reduce the risk of them, and any advice that they can offer us as we care for Autistic children and young people. Let's learn more together.

Support strategies for your Group:

- Some Autistic children will have a school support plan. This, along with parent/carer conversations, or conversations with young people themselves if they are old enough, should be a starting point for developing your support strategy.
- Find out how they prefer to communicate. It may be that using the PECS system of communication, some sign language (e.g. BSL, Makaton or Signalong – depends if a child uses these), photos, or gestures, along with speech may help you to communicate better with Autistic children and understand their communication to you.
- Visual timetables (using pictures or symbols) can be very useful so that an Autistic child can find it easier to understand what is happening now and next and to move to their next activity with more confidence.

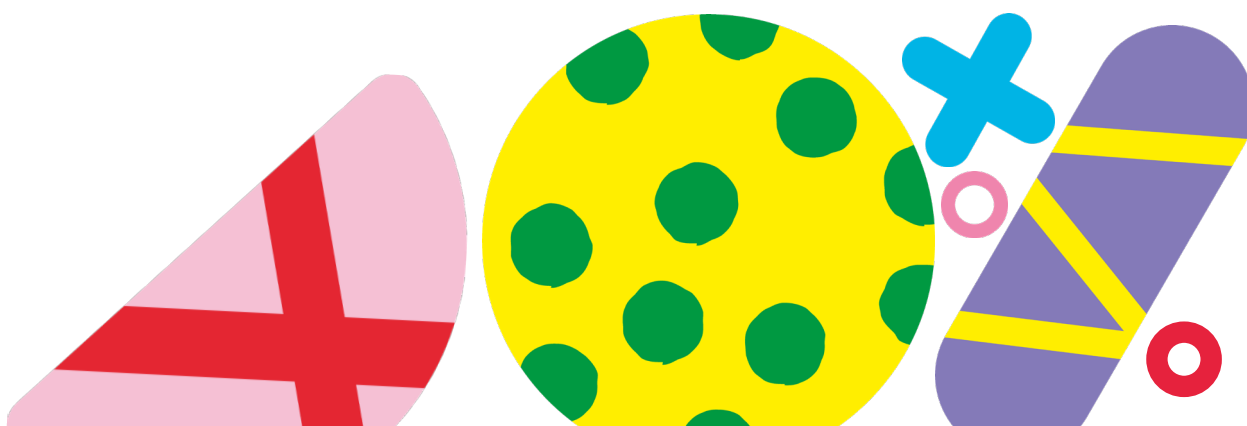




- Routine and structure are very important, an Autistic child needs to know in advance what they are doing and when, each time the group meets.
- There should not be any sensory overload such as loud noise. If this is likely then a quieter area may be more comfortable for an Autistic child, or provide ear defenders.
- Any teaching may need to be at a slower pace and may need to be reinforced by a one-to-one helper giving additional explanation (preferably visually) for an Autistic child.
- An Autistic child may need help to focus on everyday activities such as being able to change for swimming, sitting down and eating with friends at a table, or going to the toilet.

Here are some Autism myths that we can bust:

- “We’re all ‘on the spectrum’ somewhere.” Autism is a neurodiversity, a different way of the brain being wired. You are either Autistic, or not, you can’t be “A little bit Autistic.”
- “Children can grow out of it.” As we’ve explored above, Autism is a difference hard wired into the brain. It is an integral part of who an Autistic person is and cannot be “grown out of” or “cured”. There are loads of ‘treatments’ and ‘therapies’ out there, but mostly they seem to be about trying to force an Autistic child to behave like a non-Autistic child; few are of any real value and most are harmful.
- “Autism is just a ‘boy’ thing.” Girls can be Autistic too. Autistic girls are often better at masking their differences, as well as generally being better at copying or mimicking their non-Autistic peers. This, and the prevalent myth that Autism is a male neurodiversity, has meant that Autistic girls often go unnoticed and unsupported.
- “All Autistic people are like the film character ‘Rain Man’, right?” Wrong. Some Autistic people have extraordinary talents and abilities, however this isn’t typical. No two people are the same, and that goes for Autistic children and young people too.
- “Autistic people don’t experience emotions.” Also wrong. Autistic people experience all of the emotions that anyone else does, but may express or respond to them differently.
- “Vaccines are responsible for Autism.” We don’t fully understand why some people are born Autistic and others aren’t, but we do know that it’s nothing to do with vaccines. As we’ve explored already, Autism is a neurodiversity that is hard wired into the brain from foetal development, so Autistic people are ‘born’ Autistic not ‘made’ Autistic.





- “Child ‘A’ has ‘severe Autism’ and Child ‘B’ has ‘mild Autism.’” Terms like ‘mild’ or ‘severe’, ‘high-functioning’ or ‘low-functioning’, are not helpful when describing an Autistic child or young person. Each child is different and may have a range of other factors affecting them, for example a disability or a long-term health condition.

Further information:

The National Autistic Society www.autism.org.uk

‘Invited to Belong’ has been developed in partnership between Urban Saints and Youthscape.



Youthscape

www.urbansaints.org/invitedtobelong