

Autism – As a starting point

What is Autism?

Autism is the word used to describe a lifelong difference in a person's neurology. It's very difficult to say exactly what 'it' is because it can't be separated from the person.

Edinburgh university describe it as: 'a way of being in the world; it's a way of processing the things that come into your body (sights and sounds and so on). It affects how you perceive and interact with people. There will also be differences in how you plan and manage activities and organising that information can translate into different behaviour.'

In essence, an autistic person will see, process and understand the world in a different way from someone who isn't autistic, for all of their life.

There's lots of information out there about autism – but not all of it is helpful – or even correct. Here's our top four frequently asked questions:

Q1 – Can you grow out of autism?

In a word, no. There's a lot of misinformation out there suggesting that autism is a childhood condition, but this isn't true. It's a lifelong difference in neurology. It's not a disease that can be treated or cured, and it's not something you can grow out of, although the challenges and obstacles faced by an autistic person could change, as will the way a person is equipped to handle them.

Q2– Girls can't be autistic, or can they?

For a long time, girls were understudied when it came to autism, so it was thought that being autistic was purely related to males. However, we now know this is not true. Girls are known to be better at 'masking' autism though – which means they adapt better to social environments so their challenges or differences are often not as obvious as they can be with some boys.

Q3 – I heard that autistic people can't show empathy or make friends, is that correct?

Replace autistic with the word 'human.' Humans can sometimes find expressing empathy to one another difficult. But others don't. Some humans find making friends a challenge. Others don't.

It is true to say, however, that one commonality shared by autistic people is finding it difficult to be in or read social situations, often not knowing how to 'put themselves in someone else's shoes.'



The flip side is that it's very common for autistic people to be highly empathetic. So much so that some people will actually experience pain in their bodies because they feel so much for another person.

New studies have also shown that expressing empathy and communication is no more a problem for autistic people than it is for anyone else BUT evidence does show that autistic people communicate better with one another.

This, of course, would mean forming friendships in traditional ways could be difficult. But difficulty doesn't mean a person doesn't want friends, just that there are obstacles making it a more difficult process for both parties.

Q4- Are all autistic children just naughty?

Reality: ALL children can be naughty. But we think what this one is referring to is the snap judgement offered when autistic children may be struggling to deal with some kind of change in their environment.

While all autistic people process the world around them in a way unique to them, there are some commonalities. Sensory overload is one.

Often referred to as a 'meltdown,' if a child is trying to process multiple sensory signals at once – maybe an unusual or unfamiliar environment - this can be an assault on their senses.

A shopping mall, for example. Noise, light, crowds, smells, temperature... throw in any communication differences also common for autistic children and what do we get? Something, that with a cursory glance, could come across as a naughty child having a tantrum.

To sum up – some autistic kids are naughty because some kids are naughty. But oftentimes what's perceived as naughty is a set of responses to unpredictable and overwhelming sensory changes.

