CANUCKS AUTISM NETWORK

Autism Language Guide

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Autism Definition and Prevalence

Autism is characterized by differences in social communications, sensory sensitivities, and repetitive behaviour, as well as a wide range of individual strengths and abilities.

There are huge variations in how Autistic traits present themselves across individuals. Most people who have a diagnosis of autism also have a second form of neurodivergence, most commonly ADHD and/or anxiety.

- 1 in 25 children & youth are on the autism spectrum in BC.
- Over 34,000 children and youth are on the autism spectrum in BC.

Source: Ministry of Child and Family Development & BC Stats Population Estimates and Projections, 2024 (There is no public data for the prevalence of autism in adults within BC)

Guiding Principles

There is a wide range of preferences within the community that we serve.

We aim to talk about autism in an intentional way that respects the spectrum of perspectives and experiences. We recognize that these preferences evolve over time, which is why we are committed to seeking ongoing input from the autism community. Here are some concepts to keep in mind:

- **Avoid deficit-based language.**
  We highlight the many abilities of Autistic individuals rather than focusing on the challenges or positioning autism as a burden. We would never use the phrase ‘suffering from autism’.
- **Autism is a developmental disability/disorder**.
  NOT a disease or illness in need of a cure.
- **Autism is a spectrum.**
  Every individual on the autism spectrum has unique strengths, interests, and abilities.
- **Avoid terminology based on “functioning”.**
  Instead of using the terms 'high functioning' or 'low functioning' to describe strengths and challenges, CAN’s preferred phrasing is 'an individual with high support needs' or ‘an individual with low support needs'.
- **Avoid comparison groups.**
  Rather than using the terms ‘healthy’, ‘normal’ or ‘normally developing’, we use one of the following: neurotypical or typical adults/typically developing children.
- **Normalize autism.**
  In general, we want to avoid framing autism as a superpower or deficit. Ie. “Well similar to you or I, our participants can…” as opposed to “People on the spectrum have unbelievable gifts…”

- **Avoid generalizations.**
  We try to avoid general statements like “Autistic people tend to be…”. Instead, we use less general language such as “Some Autistic people may …etc.”.

Preferred Language

We alternate between person- and identity-first language in public communications.

- **Person-First**
  “Child/youth/adult *on the autism spectrum*” OR simply “*on the spectrum”*
- **Identity-First:**
  “*Autistic* child/youth/adult”

We capitalize the “A” in “Autistic”, as those who prefer this language consider autism a core part of their identity.

Non-Preferred Language

Generally speaking, we *avoid* the following phrasing in our public messaging.

- **“With Autism”**
  Child/youth/adult/person “*with autism*”
- **“Living with autism”**
  Child/youth/adult/person “*living with autism*”

Many Autistic individuals feel this phrasing portrays autism as an aspect of their personhood that can or must be separated. In the second example, many feel that autism is being referred to as a “roommate”.

In-Person Interactions

Try to determine the preferred phrasing of the person you’re speaking with.

For example:

- If the parent you are speaking with is referring to their child as “someone with autism”, you should aim to reply with person-first language.
- If the adult participant you are speaking with refers to themselves as “Autistic”, you should aim to use identity-first language during your conversation.

If you are unsure, consider using person-first and identity-first interchangeably. However, it's important to note that many within the autism community feel very strongly about the language they use.

Very generally speaking, we find that:

- Parents tend to prefer 'person-first language'.
- Youth & adult members tend to prefer 'identity-first language'.

When in doubt, you can always respectfully ask!

You might consider something like:
"I want to make sure I'm using language that you're comfortable with. Do you prefer that I refer to [you OR your child] as Autistic OR on the autism spectrum?"

Mass Communications

In recognition of the various preferences, we use both person-first and identity-first phrasing in all mass communications.

Mass communications channels can include, but are not limited to, our website, social media, and newsletters.

Based on input from our community, we aim to use person-first phrasing (on the autism spectrum) in children & family-based communications and identity-first phrasing (Autistic) in youth & adult communications.

Autism Acceptance Over Awareness

Awareness is no longer enough.

Choosing to celebrate acceptance over awareness has gained a lot of traction in recent years, particularly as the autism community calls for this change.

Our vision is for every individual on the spectrum to be understood, accepted, and supported in all community spaces. We believe that people on the spectrum have the right to an active voice: to be heard, valued, and seen.

We cannot achieve this dream of a better future if we don't move beyond awareness. Meaningful change requires collective effort, which is why we are looking to the community to support the important shift from awareness to acceptance.

Background on Moving Away From the Puzzle Piece

While some people identify with the puzzle piece, a large majority of Autistic individuals have a visceral reaction to it.

Many feel that the symbol has been used to stigmatize and dehumanize Autistic people signifying that they are 'incomplete,' 'mysterious' or 'missing' core aspects of personhood.

Additional Resources

This resource was created using the Autism Alliance of Canada's Language Guide as an important reference.

Want to learn more about Canucks Autism Network? Visit canucksautism.ca!

- Our mission, vision, and values
- Frequently asked questions
- Stories from our community