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South Cumbria  
NHS Foundation Trust



# Language and Autism

A co-produced guide to using  
neuro-affirmative language with autistic  
people

Katherine Simcock  
Principal Speech & Language Therapist  
([Katherine.simcock@lscft.nhs.uk](mailto:Katherine.simcock@lscft.nhs.uk))  
July 2023

In early 2023, a service improvement project aimed to consult local autistic people in Lancashire and South Cumbria regarding the language we use about autism. This used contemporary evidence to generate questions about language preferences and vocabulary. Seventeen participant responses were considered, alongside current research. The guide below outlines some of the preferences from both the evidence and the local autistic community.

This provides a generalised guide to language preferences. There will always be differences between individuals and **it is essential** that language used with all autistic service users is person centred. This means that individuals' preferences should be discussed with people as they access services and preferred language should always be used.

Recently, there has been a shift in language regarding neurodiversity. Neurodiversity refers to the range of cognitive profiles we might see across a population. It is important to recognise that amongst a neuro-diverse population we might see:

- Neuro-typical individuals; people with cognitive profiles which follow an assumed developmental pathway
- Neuro-divergent individuals; people with cognitive profiles which may follow a different developmental pattern

Table below: Autistic people’s main preferences from responses

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Language Preferences in local survey</b>	<b>Least popular/ unfavourable options</b>
<b>Identity first language</b>	Autistic person	Person with autism
<b>How autism might be described</b>	Difference Characteristics	Disorder
<b>How a person is impacted</b>	Individual strengths and differences	Mild/ severe
<b>Environmental impact on verbal communication</b>	Situational mutism Selective mutism Non-speaking at times	
<b>Physical actions we may see</b>	Communicating distress	Behaviour that challenges
<b>Communication</b>	Different communication styles	
<b>Sensory perception</b>	Sensory differences Sensory processing differences	Sensory processing disorder Autistic Sensory Perception
<b>Enjoyable activities</b>	Strengths	Current obsession

	Special interests	
	Area of expertise	
	Passions	
<b>Making adjustments</b>	Reasonable adjustments	Treatment/ interventions
	Supporting the individual's needs	Equitable requirements
<b>Predictability</b>	Thrives with predictability and structure	Desire for sameness
		Rigidities
<b>The autistic spectrum</b>	You either are or are not autistic (but every autistic person is different)	

The findings of the survey suggest that the local autistic people who participated are broadly aligned with the evidence base regarding neuro-affirmative language choices, although there are individual differences to be seen across the results. The key people in their lives (i.e. parents, siblings or partners) are less firmly aligned and are flexible with some terminology.

Neuro-affirmative language aims to frame a person's profile in a less deficit based way. Strengths and areas of difficulty still need to be identified and considered where appropriate.

**Consideration of language preferences should always be discussed and agreed between clinicians and patients.**

“Language is a powerful means for shaping how people view autism. If [we] take steps to avoid ableist language, researchers, service providers, and society at large may become more accepting and accommodating of autistic people.” – Bottema Beutal (2022)

## Appendices

### Key Themes and References

Theme	Neuro-affirmative language	Evidence
<b>Identity first language</b>	Autistic person/ Autistic neurology	NHS England (n.d.); Kenny et al, (2016); Monk et al (2022); Dwyer et al (2022)
<b>How autism might be described</b>	Difference/ differences/ characteristics	Bottema-Beutal et al (2021); NHS England (n.d.); Monk et al (2022); Dwyer et al (2022)

<b>How a person is impacted</b>	Focus on strengths and needs	Kenny et al, (2016); Economic and Social Research Council, (2022); Monk et al (2022); Pellicano and Houting (2022); Mitchell et al (2022)
<b>Environmental impact on verbal communication</b>	Situational mutism/ non-speaking at times	Economic and Social Research Council (2022); Monk et al (2022)
<b>Physical reactions we may see</b>	Communicating distress	NHS England (n.d.); Pellicano and Houting (2022)
<b>Communication</b>	Differences / communication style / double empathy problem	Bottema-Beutal et al, (2021); Economic and Social Research Council (2022); Monk et al (2022); Pellicano and Houting (2022); Mitchel et al (2022)
<b>Sensory perception</b>	Sensory differences/ perceptual differences/ autistic sensory perception	Economic and Social Research Council (2022); Pellicano and Houting (2022); Ratto et al (2022)
<b>Enjoyable activities</b>	Passions / area of expertise / strengths	NHS England (n.d); Monk et al (2022)
<b>Making adjustments</b>	Reasonable adjustments / equitable requirements / support	Doyle (2020); Economic and Social Research Council (2022)
<b>Predictability</b>	Thrives with structure/ thrives with routine	Economic and Social research Council (2022); Bottema-Beutal et al (2021); Doyle (2020)

## The autistic spectrum

You either are, or are not autistic

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