



# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## The Conversation Around Autism is Changing: How Best to Support Your Autistic Child or Clients (Part 1 of 2)

by Dani Kinsley, MS, OTR/L

### Watch your language.



- Avoiding ableist language is an important way to show respect for the wide range of neurodiversity that exists in the human population. Ableist language is any language that promotes beliefs and practices that discriminate against disabled individuals.



- **"Autistic" vs. "Person with Autism":** Many adults on the spectrum prefer the identity-affirming term "Autistic" instead of person-first language such as "person with autism"; still others use the more neutral "person on the autism spectrum". Many people also similarly prefer to self-identify as "disabled" rather than as "a person with a disability". Autistic self-advocates state that autism is an inherent part of their identity and is therefore not something they wish to be separated from in the way that person-first language can indicate.

- o Ask what language your child, client, or friend prefers.



- Ditch functioning labels such as "high-functioning" or "low-functioning". Use descriptive and specific terms such as "high support needs for completing school work" or "low support needs for personal care tasks" instead.



- Some Autistic individuals also have intellectual, learning, or other developmental disabilities, and some do not. Avoid the use of general and potentially-patronizing terms such as "special needs" when referring to other diagnoses.



- Use the term "non-speaking" instead of "non-verbal" for individuals who do not communicate using traditional spoken language. Do not assume that non-speaking individuals have an intellectual disability or decreased ability to comprehend spoken language.



### Presume competence.



- When caregivers, family members, friends, and clinicians presume competence, it means that they recognize that Autistic individuals have many strengths, abilities, and skills, and they treat them accordingly.



- People can reach their highest potential when they are appropriately challenged and given opportunities for growth and development rather than judged for perceived limitations based solely on a diagnosis.

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(cont.)

## Provide robust access to various types of communication with high- and low-tech options.



- Some Autistic individuals are non-speaking or may need to communicate with others using a variety of non-speaking methods. For these individuals, it is extremely important to provide augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) options.



- AAC options can range from no-tech or low-tech (gestures, facial expressions, writing, drawing, or pointing to words, photos, pictures, or letters) to high-tech (using an app, tablet, or computerized speech-generating device).



- It may take a while to discover which options work best for each individual. A speech-language pathologist (SLP) who specializes in AAC can help. Even very young children (younger than 3 years of age) benefit from AAC access.

## Recognize that independence—without-modifications-or-support is not always the gold standard.



- Not every individual is able (or desires) to be completely independent in life. Most Autistic individuals can thrive with the right supports, adaptations, or modifications in place. Many cultures also value interdependence and family caregiving dynamics.



- In therapy situations, the clinician may be inclined to assume that the goal is for the client to become as independent as possible. However, if the client or family has a different goal in mind (e.g., being able to complete self-care tasks with adaptations in place and caregiver support as needed), then that goal should be respected.

### References:

- AAC information from ASHA: <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/aac/>
- Identity-first language from ASAN: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>
- Autism FAQs from an Autistic self-advocate: <https://www.autistichoya.com/pi/introduction-to-autism-faqs-of-autism.html>
- OTR/L Meg Proctor's neurodiversity-affirming courses on how best to support Autistic clients: <https://learnplaythrive.com/approach/>
- Avoiding ableist language: <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/aut.2020.0014>
- The "double empathy problem": <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/double-empathy-explained/>

## Recognize the "double empathy problem".



- The "double empathy problem" is a theory that explains that Autistic and non-Autistic individuals inherently and naturally demonstrate a "two-way mismatch" when it comes to social interaction, communication, and friendship. For example, an Autistic individual may avoid eye contact during a conversation even though they are fully attending to what is being said. The non-Autistic peer may find this behavior off-putting or even offensive if they interpret avoided eye contact as a lack of interest in or attention to the conversation.



- Historically, the diagnostic criteria for autism have indicated that it is the Autistic individual's "social deficits" which cause communication breakdown between people of different neurotypes. However, the double empathy problem theory challenges this belief by explaining that Autistic people simply have a different way of communicating.



- This theory explains why Autistic peers tend to enjoy and thrive in each other's company and why people often establish the deepest friendships with those of similar neurotypes.

## Learn from Autistic adults.



- Adult Autistic self-advocates have mobilized in the last decade to share their lived experiences via social media groups and pages, other online outlets such as blogs and websites, and through publishing non-fiction and fiction books or forming non-profit organizations.



- In order to advocate for younger Autistic individuals, these adults encourage parents, clinicians, and professionals to learn from their experiences by reading their content and engaging in conversations about how to best support their Autistic children, family members, or clients.

### Related Handy Handouts®:

- [630 – Autism—the Basics](#)
- [134 – Accommodating Autistic Children Within An Inclusive Setting](#)

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