



# Autism Friendly Communication Top tips

## Purpose

Norfolk County Council Adult Social Care worked with autistic adults to put in place an adult autism friendly communication guide.

We used this guide to help us communicate effectively with autistic people in working together to plan a new autism social care early help service.

We hope to share this co-produced tool to support adult social care and wider services, to work more effectively with autistic people to meet their needs.

## What we did

We discussed autism friendly communications under five headings: visual, verbal, written, non-verbal and generic communication, with two groups:

- ✓ Group discussion: a group of autistic people and family carers which met over Microsoft Teams. Attendees: 4 autistic adults, 1 young adult and 1 parent carer.
- ✓ Norfolk Autism Partnership Board Diagnosis and Support working group open to autistic adults, their family carers, voluntary organisations, and professionals who work with autistic people and their family carers.

*'If someone speaks down to me, I will quite naturally feel like expressing my anger towards them. The advice to 'Use simple, clear language and short phrases' does not apply to me, and I would be offended by this'. Quote by autistic adult.*

## Context

Dr Stephen Shore, an autism advocate who is on the spectrum said, 'If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism'. Autistic people each have a unique, individual experience; no two people are the same.

This guide proposes potential challenges or difficulties autistic adults may face. It provides considerations of reasonable adjustments to put in place, to meet the needs of a diverse group of autistic people. However, it is impossible to find one size that fits all. This guide will not apply to everyone, meaning those who work with autistic people need to ask first, truly listen and understand how the unique characteristics of autism present in different ways.

This guide cannot aim to set expectations of what autism is. Professionals need to understand the individual's experiences of what it is to be autistic.





# How I want people to communicate with me.

## Verbal Communication

### General Points

- ✓ If you want me to engage with you, find out and ask me about things that I am passionate about.
- ✓ Check how I want to respond; it may not be verbally.
- ✓ Ensure I know you are speaking to me, use my name.
- ✓ Have a two-way dialogue, ask me questions, and let me answer them. If you don't want an honest answer don't ask the question.
- ✓ When answering a question, it is better to say 'I don't know' than make something up or make me feel that I have asked a stupid question. Every question is valid.
- ✓ Acknowledge my feelings.
- ✓ Check in with me during the discussion to make sure I am ok.
- ✓ Cut the waffle, avoid small talk, and get to the point. Be clear and concise. Don't speak too fast.
- ✓ Be unambiguous. Avoid metaphors (e.g. it's raining cats and dogs) and sarcasm.
- ✓ If I feel pressured or feel stressed by the conversation, I may react, but you may not see this (I may internalise and mask my reaction). If you become aware of rising anxiety or stress, take it seriously and ask me what I need. If appropriate give me some space and time.
- ✓ Allow me enough time to process information between statements or questions. Offer to write the information down or repeat the question. If it appears necessary, check that I have understood the question. But be comfortable with the silence and allow me to change my mind.

### Environmental

- ✓ Ask me where I would like you to sit or sit beside me, not in front of me.
- ✓ Don't get too close and please don't touch me.
- ✓ Consider any background noises that could distract me.
- ✓ I can look where I like. Eye contact can be challenging and if forced it can cause stress.

### Pre and Post engagement

- ✓ Encourage the use of an advocate.
- ✓ Check how I want to respond – it may not be verbal.
- ✓ Foreshadowing is helpful - send out a clear agenda of what we will do together, in what order and what we want to achieve from the discussion. When we meet again repeat the plan for the interaction.
- ✓ Provide a list of questions before the interaction to enable me to prepare and write down my answers.
- ✓ Give information in more than one way. Consider sending a written communication (e.g. email or letter) after a phone call or conversation - include what was agreed, any actions and next steps. This will help me to retain the information and/or remember what has been agreed.
- ✓ Give me the opportunity to ask follow up questions after the meeting – because processing can go on for hours or days.

### Phone calls

- ✓ Phone calls can be hard to process - because of auditory processing delay.





# How I want people to communicate with me.

## Visual Communication

### General Points

- ✓ Ask a neurodivergent person to create any visual resources and find someone who is good at it, who will understand what autistic people need. Click [here](#) for more information on autistic peer to peer communication.

### Documents

- ✓ Consider background colours (e.g. use pale blue, green) - as contrasting colours can hurt and bright colours can be overwhelming.
- ✓ Offer a well-structured layout, with clear sections (e.g. not too busy, not too much overwhelming information). A good eye for design is important to get it right.
- ✓ Consistent font and size (e.g. Century Gothic, **Comic Sans MS**). Images must not be confusing or appear to contradict the text (e.g. 'Your name is on the waiting list' but the image shows a list and my name is not on the list).
- ✓ If anything is not quite right (e.g. not straight) then it will be hard for some autistic people to look at it.
- ✓ Please provide a photo of who I am going to meet.
- ✓ Avoid being patronising (which easy read documents can be).
- ✓ Multiple options are needed, easy read, not easy read etc.

### Images and Videos

- ✓ No background noise or fuzziness. Clear presentation and clarity.
- ✓ Be careful with fictional characters for animations – make sure they don't invite too much analysis.
- ✓ The animation pictures need to be complete – don't leave the person without legs.
- ✓ Use relevant pictures.
- ✓ Videos can be very helpful (e.g. for directions to a building do a video). But make sure it's straight, not off-kilter, or it will be hard to look at.
- ✓ Consider people who have visual impairments – say verbally what is going on as well. Have the option of subtitles within a video, to make it more accessible.





## How I want people to communicate with me. Written Communication (e.g. letters and questionnaires)

### General Points

- ✓ Clear fonts are important (e.g. Century Gothic, **Comic Sans MS** are good). Font and size – not too small, not a curly or fancy font.
- ✓ To emphasize text, use bold - avoid underlining and italics which make the text appear to run together. Avoid block capitals which make text harder to read.
- ✓ Incorrect or poor grammar and punctuation can be distracting.
- ✓ Write acronyms in full first, so I know what they mean.
- ✓ Use short phrases.
- ✓ Be aware that words can be interpreted differently.
- ✓ Provide both easy read and plain English versions.
- ✓ Use appropriate tools for level of understanding.
- ✓ Provide Braille and translated versions.
- ✓ Multiple choice options can be helpful, but also provide space for what I want to say (because often I might say 'it depends' and need to explain this).
- ✓ Provide context and explanation to help with understanding.
- ✓ If asking a question, ensure you cover within the text what you are actually looking for.
- ✓ Be aware of words/language to ensure consideration of different cultures to avoid potential offence.



## How I want people to communicate with me. Non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures, body language, communication devices)

### General Points

- ✓ Use alternative communication systems as required (e.g. Makaton, Signalong).
- ✓ Use alternative communication devices as required (e.g. assistive technology and augmented communication aids).
- ✓ Provide British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters as required.
- ✓ Body language and gestures are communication.
- ✓ Find out what the non-verbal cues are for that person – ask someone who knows them well.
- ✓ Sometimes people may be **situationally** non-verbal. There may be non-verbal cues they can use at those times.





## How I want people to communicate with me. Generic communication (e.g. environmental)

### Physical environment

- ✓ Contact or visit the venue to check out the environment and use the National Autistic Society Autism Friendly checklists [here](#).
- ✓ Consider acoustics but be aware everyone's needs are not the same. I might like libraries because they are quiet, or I might find the silence difficult as the small noises are amplified. I may prefer the hustle and bustle of a café.
- ✓ Noisy, too bright (e.g. fluorescent lights), too busy environments might be difficult for me.
- ✓ Make sure the temperature is comfortable - it's not too hot or too cold.

### During the session

- ✓ Avoid distracting or overwhelming jewellery, clothing, perfume etc.
- ✓ Be explicit about what I can do (e.g. tell me 'I can wear my ear defenders').
- ✓ Make fidget toys or sensory tools available but be aware that I may feel self-conscious about using them. Ask sensitively if I've brought anything to help me feel more comfortable, or if I'd like to use one of them.
- ✓ Consider personal space. Ask me 'Where do you want me to sit?'
- ✓ Be mindful of things that may cause stress for me, and when identified don't make them worse.
- ✓ Don't assume I can't understand or adapt.
- ✓ Don't expect chit chat.

### Planning

- ✓ Ask in advance if I have any needs.
- ✓ Be on time.
- ✓ Think about time of day – mornings might be difficult for me if I have insomnia, or I am on medication. Also be mindful the meeting is likely to have more impact on me than on you or on neurotypical people.
- ✓ Think about the time available for the meeting. This may be a compromise between how long you think is needed, and how long I think is needed. If the meeting ends before I can make all my points this may be very uncomfortable for me.
- ✓ Be clear about who is going to be at the meeting.
- ✓ Advise I can bring and use tools or equipment to support my sensory needs.
- ✓ Be clear that I can bring an advocate who can help.
- ✓ Videos and photos before attending a venue can help me.
- ✓ Involve me in deciding where we will meet.
- ✓ Be explicit about what we are going to talk about. Consider giving a list – but then make sure you stick to it.

