AutismBC

AUTISMBC COMMUNICATION GUIDE:

Nurturing Safe and Inclusive Spaces Through Language

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Background

The language we choose to describe disability matters greatly. It can shape our perceptions of the world and it can signal how we view others. Language is a powerful tool that has a very real impact on both perception and lived experience, signaling to others they are in a safe space. Using inclusive language is a key tool in combating ableism and fostering diversity allowing us to empower, support and connect.

As a neurodivergent organization, AutismBC prioritizes learning from our community and uplifting autistic voices. We follow the lead of autistic self-advocates with those with lived-experience using neuro-affirming language over deficit-based medical model terminology which can lead to harmful assumptions of a person's life. This means we view and describe autism as a neutral and inherent piece of an individual's identity aiming to reduce barriers. We value inclusion and respect in our language choices and we will always defer to an individual's preference.

This guide exists to provide general principles to support AutismBC's staff, partners, volunteers and community in using respectful and inclusive language. Its purpose is to foster respectful and consistent language while not directing how our members or the autistic community refer to themselves or describe their own experiences. This guide is a living document that we will continue to update as language evolves to continue to strengthen community while endeavoring to support human rights.

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Language Guide

Introduction

As part of our commitment to creating a safe and inclusive environment for our community, AutismBC Communications adopted a list of inclusive terms and imagery.

We recommend using the terms and images included below.

List of Inclusive Terms

Below is a list of inclusive and neutral terms that AutismBC has adopted as an organization. The adoption of these terms is linked to AutismBC's Stigma Free Zone Action Plan. It represents the values of inclusion, and respect for diversity and representation. These terms will be used consistently across communications and platforms. Ongoing learning and education is crucial to understanding the context, complexity and value of using inclusive terms.

AUTISM LANGUAGE PART 1

To Use	Not the preferred choice, but can be used when necessary.	To Avoid
• Autistic • Autistic person • Autistic individual	• Person on (autism) spectrum	• Person with Autism • People with Autism • Individual with ASD • Person affected by ASD

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- Autism is a neurodevelopmental identity that reflects a different but equally valid way of experiencing, processing, and interacting with the world. Autistic individuals may communicate, sense, and think in ways that diverge from societal norms, often with unique strengths, deep interests, and distinct sensory experiences. Rather than viewing autism as a deficit, neurodivergent-affirming approaches recognize it as part of the rich mosaic of the human experience.

- Use language affirming autism as an integral part of an individual's identity.

- Use identity-first language, such as 'autistic person' or 'neurodivergent individual,' to honour autism as an integral part of someone's identity, fostering inclusion and affirming the lived experiences of the autistic community.

- When in doubt, ask. Once you know someone's preferences, respect and follow them; our goal is to honour the individual.

AUTISM LANGUAGE PART 2

To Use	To Avoid
• Support for... • Resources for... • Therapy... • Education about... • Information regarding... • Improving your/our...	• Treatment for/of... • Affected by autism • Impacted by autism • Cure, recovery, prevention, from/of autism • Tragedy of, war on, eliminate autism

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To Use	To Avoid
• Addressing needs/concerns... • Accessing or making something accessible • Finding... • Accommodations available... • Find new ways to... • Discover... • Ideas for... • Trying or Practicing... • Developmental Differences • Honour lived experiencs of... • Foster inclusion for... • Respecting individual strengths and preferences of...	• Normal looking or become normal, regular, “like everyone else” • Slow, simple, abnormal • Fighting autism... • Eradicating autism... • Victim of... • Afflicted with... • Struggles with... • Learn to... • Breaking through the barriers of autism... • Handicapped • Special Needs • Differently abled • Physically challenged • Mentally challenged • High/low functioning • Development deficits

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- Use neuroaffirming language, rather than terms that suggest autism should be fixed, treated, or eliminated.

- Words shape attitudes, and attitudes shape systems. When educators, clinicians, families, and peers use affirming language, it fosters environments where autistic people feel empowered, supported and connected.

GENDER LANGUAGE

Gender Neutural	Gender Inclusive
• "They" • "Them" • "Folx" • "This person/individual" • "Everyone" • "Parent, Adult, Caregiver" instead of "Mother or Father" • "Child" instead of "Boy/Son or Girl/ Daughter" • "Sibling" Instead of "Brother or Sisters" • "Partner/Spouse" instead of "Husband/wife" • "Everybody" or "folks/folx" instead of "Ladies and gentlemen"	"Police Officer" instead of "Policeman" "Humankind" instead of "Mankind" "Server" instead of "Waiter/Waitress" "Firefighter" instead of "Fireman" "Flight Attendant" vs "Stewardess" "Mail Carrier" vs "Mailman'

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- Neutral language and writing avoid bias toward any group(s). It is not necessarily formal or informal, positive or negative. A neutral register is used to deliver information in a straightforward way, free from the writer's personal opinions or beliefs.

- Use words that do not specify whether the subject of the sentence is female or male.

- Language is a powerful tool for equity. When people model inclusive communication, they help shape a culture where neurodivergent and gender-diverse individuals are celebrated, not just accommodated.

- Affirming language reflects affirming values. It tells people: ‘You matter here, just as you are.”

- It is important to use gender neutral and inclusive language in interactions and “watch for the cues”. People will leave clues to their pronouns within their conversations and correspondence. It can be helpful to watch, listen and adjust.

- Inclusive language and writing are free from words, phrases or tones that reflect prejudice, assumptions, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups.

- Use language that avoids bias toward a particular sex or social gender.

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Neuroaffirmative and Inclusive Terms

A comprehensive list of neuroaffirmative and inclusive terms, including the non-speaking community, deaf/hard of hearing individuals, and those with visual impairments:

1. **AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication):** Tools and strategies used to assist individuals who have difficulty with verbal speech, including communication boards, apps, and devices.

2. **Ableism:** Discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities, including neurodivergent individuals. Focuses on the systemic preference for non-disabled people and the advantages they receive. See: *disablism*

3. **Alexithymia:** A trait where a person has difficulty identifying and describing emotions.

4. **Allistic:** A term used to describe people who are not autistic. It simply means “non-autistic” and is often used in conversations about autism to distinguish between autistic and non-autistic experiences without framing one as the default or “normal.”

5. **Apraxia:** Difficulty planning and coordinating the movements needed for speech, even when the person knows what they want to say.

6. **Assistive Technology:** Tools and devices used to assist individuals with disabilities in their daily activities, such as screen readers, hearing aids, and communication devices.

7. **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** A developmental disorder that affects communication and behaviour, though many prefer the term “autism” over “disorder.” ASD is the clinical term used in the DSM-5, while the social model approach often uses the term Autistic.

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8. **Autistic:** Used to describe someone who identifies or has an autism diagnosis. This wording is often preferred over 'person with autism' because it reflects an identity-first approach.

9. **Autistic Acceptance:** Moving beyond awareness to actively accepting and valuing autistic individuals for who they are.

10. **Autistic Burnout:** A state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by long-term exposure to overwhelming environments and unmet needs.

11. **Blind:** Refers to individuals with little or no vision. It's important to use respectful and specific language that acknowledges their experiences.

12. **Braille:** A tactile writing system used by people who are blind or visually impaired to read and write through touch.

13. **Co-occurring:** Refers to when two or more traits, disabilities, or diagnoses are present at the same time in an individual. For example, an autistic person may also have co-occurring ADHD, anxiety, or a learning disability.

14. **Cognitive Diversity:** The inclusion of people with diverse ways of thinking and processing information, recognizing the value of different cognitive styles.

15. **Deaf:** Refers to people with significant hearing loss who often use sign language as their primary communication method. Being Deaf can also reflect a cultural and linguistic identity, not just audiological loss.

16. **Diagnosis:** The formal process of identifying a disability or difference, such as autism, based on assessments by qualified professionals.

17. **Disability Pride:** The idea that individuals with disabilities, including neurodivergent individuals, should take pride in their identities and advocate for their rights and inclusion.

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18. **Disablism:** Discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities, including neurodivergent individuals. Focuses on the discrimination and barriers faced by disabled people. See: *Ableism.*

19. **Double Empathy Problem:** The concept that communication difficulties between autistic and neurotypical people are mutual and arise from differences in social cognition.

20. **Distress/In Distress:** This term is a more supportive alternative to "meltdown" or "tantrum." Individuals may show signs of stress or distress when overwhelmed, both internally and externally. Although this experience isn't unique to Autistics, society often frames it with shame. This language can invalidate someone's needs and make their overwhelm seem trivial. A person might be in distress because a room is too loud or a situation becomes unmanageable, being autistic shouldn't change how we understand that.

21. **Dyspraxia:** Difficulty with coordinating movements for everyday tasks, like writing, dressing, or using utensils.

22. **Dyscalculia:** A specific learning disability that affects a person's ability to understand numbers and learn math facts.

23. **Dysgraphia:** A specific learning disability that affects a person's physical ability to write.

24. **Dyslexia:** A specific learning disability that affects reading and related language-based processing skills.

25. **Echolalia:** The repetition of words or phrases spoken by others, which can be a way for autistic individuals to process language and express themselves.

26. **Executive Functioning:** Cognitive processes that include working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control, often challenged in neurodivergent individuals.

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27. **Executive Dysfunction:** Difficulty with the brain's self-management skills, making it harder to plan, start, or complete tasks.

28. **Hard of Hearing:** Refers to people with partial hearing loss who may use spoken language, hearing aids, cochlear implants, or sign language. Identity and communication preferences vary.

29. **Hyperlexia:** A trait where a person can read at levels far beyond those expected for their age, often seen in autistic children.

30. **Identity-first Language:** A way of speaking that emphasizes autism as an integral part of a person's identity (e.g., "autistic person" instead of "person with autism").

31. **Inclusive Communication:** Practices that ensure all individuals, regardless of their communication needs, are able to participate fully in conversations and activities.

32. **Inclusive Education:** An educational approach where neurodivergent students are taught in mainstream classrooms with appropriate accommodations and support.

33. **Intersectionality:** Understanding how various aspects of a person's identity (e.g., race, gender, neurodivergence) intersect and impact their experiences and oppression.

34. **Masking:** The practice of hiding one's natural behaviors and adopting social norms to fit in, common among autistic individuals and often leading to stress and burnout.

35. **Medical Model of Disability:** Views disability as a problem to be fixed; often rejected by the autistic community.

36. **Neuroaffirmative:** Language and actions that affirm and respect the differences in neurology among individuals.

37. **Neurodivergent:** A term used to describe individuals whose

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neurological development and functioning are atypical, including those Autistics, ADHD, dyslexia, etc.

38. **Neurodivergent Needs:** Refers to the unique needs and accommodations required by neurodivergent individuals to thrive in various environments.

39. **Neurodiverse Employment:** Workplace practices that recognize and leverage the strengths of neurodivergent employees, such as flexible work arrangements and supportive environments.

40. **Neurodiversity:** The concept that neurological differences (e.g., autism, ADHD, dyslexia) should be recognized and respected as a part of human diversity.

41. **Neurodiversity Paradigm:** The perspective that neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity rather than a problem to be fixed.

42. **Neurological Differences:** Variations in neurological development and functioning among individuals.

43. **Neurotypical:** Refers to individuals whose neurological development and functioning are considered typical or average.

44. **Non-speaking, minimal speaking or selective speaking:** Refers to individuals who do not use spoken language as their primary mode of communication, preferring terms like “non-speaking” over “non-verbal.” The term “Non-Verbal” derives from the Latin word ‘without words. It perpetuates the inaccurate assumption that individuals without speech (or without using your preferred way of communication) are unable to use words or have nothing to say.

45. **Pathology Paradigm:** A framework that treats autism as a disorder to be cured; rejected by many autistic advocates.

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46. **Person-first Language:** A way of speaking that emphasizes the person before their diagnosis or disability (e.g., “person with autism” instead of “autistic person”).

47. **Positive Autistic Identity:** Embracing one’s autistic identity as a positive aspect of oneself and promoting self-acceptance.

48. **Reasonable Adjustments:** Changes made to accommodate neurodivergent individuals in various settings, ensuring equal access and opportunities.

49. **Sensory Friendly:** Environments or products designed to reduce sensory overload and accommodate sensory needs, such as quiet spaces or noise-canceling headphones.

50. **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD):** A diagnosis where the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information that comes in through the senses.

51. **Shutdown:** A less visible response to overwhelming situations, where an individual may withdraw and become unresponsive.

52. **Sign Language:** A complete, natural language used by the Deaf community that employs hand signs, facial expressions, and body movements.

53. **Social Communication Differences:** Differences in understanding and using verbal and non-verbal communication, common in autistic individuals.

54. **Social Model of Disability:** Suggests that people are disabled by societal barriers, not by their differences.

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55. **Special Interests:** Deep and intense interests in specific subjects, common among autistic individuals, which can bring joy and focus.

56. **Stimming:** Short for self-stimulatory behavior, these are repetitive movements or sounds (e.g., hand-flapping, rocking, lip biting, hair twirling, and chewing on objects) used by some autistic individuals to self-soothe or regulate sensory input.

57. **Wellbeing Support:** Support for caregivers to take time for themselves to rest, restore balance, and care for their own well-being. It offers space to reconnect with what nourishes them, whether that's family, community, culture, or personal healing, so they can continue to care for others in a good way. We use this term instead of "respite," which can carry a negative implication about disability and disabled people.

Terms to approach with care: language that may be harmful or outdated when referring to neurodivergent individuals, including those in the autistic community:

58. **Asperger's Syndrome:** This term was removed as a diagnosis in 2013 under the DSM and in 2019 under the ICD. While some people may still identify with it, it's important to understand its historical context and the shift toward more inclusive language..

59. **Autistic Savant:** This term can perpetuate stereotypes and does not accurately represent the broad range of abilities and talents within the autistic community.

60. **Comorbid:** This is a medicalized term that can make additional traits seem inherently negative or pathological. Use co-occurring instead. See: *co-occurring.*

61. **Crazy/Insane:** These terms are derogatory and can contribute to stigma around mental health and neurological differences. It's better to use specific and respectful language.

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62. **Handicapped:** This term is outdated and considered offensive. The preferred term is “disabled” or “person with a disability.”

63. **High-Functioning/Low-Functioning:** These terms can be misleading and reductionist, as they oversimplify the diverse and variable experiences of autistic individuals. It’s better to describe specific needs and strengths.

64. **Mental Retardation:** This term is outdated and offensive. The preferred terms are “intellectual disability” or “developmental delay.”

65. **Non-verbal:** This term defines a person by what they cannot do rather than how they communicate. It can feel limiting and stigmatizing. See: *non-speaking, minimal speaking,* or *selective speaking*.

66. **Normal:** When referring to neurotypical individuals, using the term “normal” implies that neurodivergent individuals are abnormal. It’s better to use “neurotypical” instead.

67. **Pervasive Developmental Disorder/Not Otherwsie Specified (PDD/NOS):** This term is no longer used in current diagnostic criteria and has been replaced by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

68. **Special Needs:** While this term is often used with good intentions, it can be seen as euphemistic and stigmatizing. Be specific about the individual’s needs and accommodations. It is acceptable to use the term “disabilities.”

69. **Suffering from Autism:** This phrase implies that autism is inherently negative and that autistic individuals are in a constant state of distress. It’s better to say “is autistic” or “has autism.” When in doubt, ask.

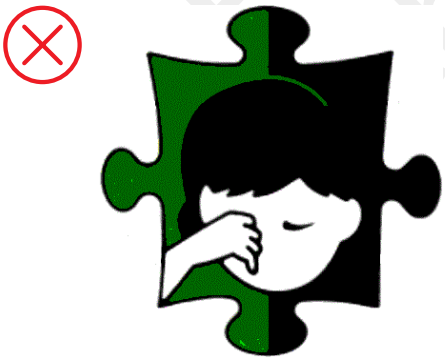
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Graphic Guide

Autism Imagery

When using imagery to represent autistic people:

- It is recommended to refrain from using the puzzle piece symbol or graphics since they are associated with many stigmas associated with autism.
- We recommend using the neurodiversity symbol or avoiding symbols altogether.
- Instead, consider opting for images that depict autistic strengths or joy.
- If your images will include people, choose models who reflect a broad range of lived experiences, identities, cultural backgrounds, and support needs.
    - This challenges the common misconception that the autistic community is a monolith.
    - It also challenges the myth that only a certain kind of person can be autistic



The original puzzle piece logo, designed to represent the mystery and sadness that were associated with autism, in 1963.



The rainbow infinity symbol, designed to represent the infinite spectrum and diversity among those who are autistic, or are in any way, not neurotypical.

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Colours that Represent Autism

When using colours to represent autistic people, consider the following:

- Historically, blue has been regarded as the colour of autism, but in recent years, the autistic community has moved away from its use due to its association with a variety of autistic stereotypes.
- The autistic community has suggested the use of other colours including red, taupe and gold.
- The rainbow is an accepted colour to represent autism as it symbolizes the idea of autism as a “spectrum” and uniqueness of each individual.
- Read more about autism colours: *Which Colour Represents Autism?*



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Autism Acceptance Month in BC

Please Use:

- In the Government of British Columbia Proclamation,
    - April is Autism Acceptance Month
    - April 2nd is Autism Acceptance Day
- Internationally, April 2nd is World Autism Day
- As a neurdivergent and neuroaffirming organization, AutismBC will use “Autism Acceptance Month” and “Autism Acceptance Day” and/or “World Autism Day” in all our internal and external communications.

Best to Avoid:

While some of the variations are accepted by other organizations in Canada and the world, AutismBC avoids using these following names to avoid confusion:

- Autism Awareness Month **X**
- Autism Awareness Day **X**
- World Autism Month **X**
- World Autism Acceptance Month **X**
- World Autism Awareness Month **X**
- World Autism Awareness Day **X**

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Guidelines to Avoid Spreading Exploitative Portrayal of Disability

Based on: *Please Stop Spreading 'Inspiration P***' About Disability*

Avoid Exploitative Narratives: Refrain from sharing or promoting stories, images, or videos that exploit disabled individuals for the purpose of inspiring non-disabled audiences.

Respect Individual Autonomy: Celebrate disabled individuals as whole, capable people with unique perspectives, aspirations, and self-determination, worthy of respect not because they "overcome," instead they exist as equals in the human experience.

Challenge Stereotypes: Be conscious of the language and imagery used in storytelling, marketing, grant development, and media representations, avoiding narratives that perpetuate stereotypes or diminish the dignity of disabled individuals.

Promote Authentic Representation: Prioritize authentic representation of disabled individuals, showcasing their diverse experiences, strengths, and contributions to society.

Center Disabled Voices: Amplify the voices and perspectives of disabled individuals, allowing them to share their own stories and advocate for their own needs and rights when supporting as an ally.

Prioritize Inclusivity: Ensure that all communication materials and initiatives are accessible and inclusive, accommodating the diverse needs and preferences of disabled individuals.

Engage in Meaningful Dialogue: Foster open and respectful dialogue with disabled individuals and disability advocacy organizations, seeking their input and feedback on representation and messaging.

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Educate and Raise Awareness: Educate yourself and others about the harmful impact of exploitative inspiration and the importance of promoting disability rights, dignity, and inclusion.

Shift the Narrative: Work to shift the narrative surrounding disability from one of inspiration or pity to one of respect, empowerment, and equality.

Commit to Change: Commit to actively challenging exploitative inspiration and promoting more ethical and inclusive representations of disability in all aspects of society. Ensure pay equity is presented when requesting a disabled person/organziation to empower, support and connect community through education and services.

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Conclusion

At AutismBC, we believe that language is more than communication. It's a reflection of our values, our respect, and our commitment to inclusion. That's why we created this Language Guide: to help shift the conversation from labels to lived experience, from assumptions to understanding.

Rooted in our mission to empower, support, and connect the autism community in BC, this guide is a tool for change. It invites families, educators, professionals, and allies to speak with intention and listen with care, because every word we choose can open a door, build trust, and foster belonging.

Together, let's lead with respect. Let's model inclusive language in every conversation, classroom, workplace, and gathering. Because a more accepting British Columbia begins with the words we speak, and the community we build.

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