

FACT SHEET: Individuals are all different!

Throughout this Fact Sheet the terms Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Autism are used interchangeably. That is, 'Autism' implies the full range of the Autism spectrum.

We all meet everyday challenges in different ways—where some may sail through quite easily, others struggle. Regardless of education, people might have what seems to be a natural ability in some areas, while others find the same tasks or events difficult. Amongst the general population there seems to be an understanding and acknowledgement of these differences; but sometimes people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are viewed in a rather simplistic way. While personality traits and, to some extent, abilities might be instantly recognised, the person who has Autism may be seen as someone who must learn to 'fit in'. In throwing a light on the individuality of people with Autism—getting to know the person, with all their quirks, their different abilities and difficulties—we can provide the best possible support and help them to shine, in their own way.

To show their ability most positively

For those of us who are familiar with people with ASD, their differences are recognised. An underlying sameness is understood—we are aware that to have received an Autism diagnosis means vulnerabilities in social communication, certain behaviours and often sensory sensitivities. They might find loud sounds stressful and/or feel stressed in a crowded environment. We are alert to the fact that although a person with ASD might be intelligent, or highly skilled in certain ways,

they might have great difficulty imparting their knowledge and demonstrating their skills. They will certainly have preferences in all aspects of their life, as we all do. These are all the things we need to know about and employ for best possible outcomes—and to enable the person to lead a meaningful life.



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Ruby's story

Ruby's story shows how her life was turned around following the recognition of her preferences and sensory needs. School was never easy for Ruby. She was often distressed throughout the day, especially during the lively music lessons and assemblies. Sometimes she would get up from her desk and run out into the playground crying. Teachers and the other children were kind to Ruby but found it difficult to console her; with limited language ability Ruby is not able to tell us how she feels. Her teacher always allowed her to have a 'special' book to look at, which helped calm her sometimes. But not always. When the family had to move house due to Dad's work it was a trying time for Ruby—her parents were very anxious about the challenges ahead. Even though previous school life had not always been happy, moving to a new school would present lots of new challenges. At least, she had been familiar with the old buildings, and some of the faces were familiar and friendly. She knew where to find a quiet retreat.

Her happy colour

Fortunately, after a few short weeks, the new school proved to be a place where Ruby could begin to relax and learn. The key to the transformation was that her new teacher recognised and acted upon the child's difficulties, primarily sound sensitivity. During a meeting with her parents the teacher learned that Ruby liked the colour yellow. She has several items of yellow clothing and yellow is the prime colour in her bedroom. It's her happy colour! It was quick and easy (thanks to Google) to find out where to buy children's ear muffs—colour yellow.

Ruby's ear adornment is now the envy of her class. She has become a minor celebrity with her difference! Best of all, the noisiness of much of school life is being reduced to a manageable level. This Autism-aware teacher also understands her student's ability and limits of understanding with words and numbers. Ruby is making slow but steady progress and being awarded yellow stars for her achievements.



A sad footnote to Ruby's story: we learned of a situation where staff were discouraged from enabling a child with Autism to wear ear muffs to minimise sound. Reason—they made him look different. Fortunately, at Ruby's new school they embrace the difference!

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When Jake takes his cat to work

For the most part Jake enjoys his work. He has a range of tasks including filing and collating and one that he especially enjoys—folding the mail and inserting it into window envelopes. He performs the task very carefully, making sure the pages are folded evenly and that the address shows clearly through the window. Because Jake seeks order and symmetry in his environment all of his work tasks suit him well. He has limited verbal skills and social engagement with fellow workers is fleeting. Surprisingly, this has been helped along by a photo of George. George is Jake's large, macho cat—held in great esteem by Jake. People were surprised to see the photo on his table top—this was a cat with attitude and comment was called for. George has provided a much needed conduit to conversation with Jake. The photo appears every day and every day people will stop at Jake's table and ask how George is. Lots of praise is heaped on this impressive cat and while Jake might not fully grasp each word being said he knows that it's all positive.



Making life much brighter

While the people's names have been changed, the above stories are based on actual case histories, as told to us. Jake's story is not intended to show that it's always easy to establish supports for people with Autism and problems are instantly resolved. Rather, the aim is to highlight the fact that sometimes, especially where personal preferences and interests are taken into account, we can make things better for the person by implementing very small changes. A common feature of Autism—appreciation of symmetry and sameness—provides a guide to what Jake can work at most successfully; and his love for a large cat has opened up an avenue for interacting with others. Those work mates are, no doubt unwittingly, making life much brighter for Jake. By recognising and supporting the characteristics of Autism—which might be viewed negatively—we can create positives. By embracing the individuality and preferences of people with Autism, learning may become a more positive experience and lives infinitely happier.



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In their own way

Individuality underpins all services—from early childhood to adulthood—provided by the Autism Association. Through early childhood and school age services, individualised programs are formulated following an assessment by a specialist team, engaging closely with the child's family. In close collaboration with the family, support strategies and specific goals are created to suit the learning profile of the individual. Across the full range of the Association's services the old adage that "one size fits all" is firmly rejected. One size does not fit all. Through the Association's Community Options programs, where adolescents and adults acquire skills in many and varied ways, including recreational activities, accessing various community facilities, using public transport, further education and more—the key is a person-centred approach with the individual with Autism central to planning. Staff work closely with each person—listening to what they have to say—to discover what's important to them, their needs and aspirations. Similarly, through the Association's employment services (AIM) staff assist people to work where they want to work. Support in employment is tailored to each individual's needs. Through all of these services, including Clinical, Community Living and others, where each person with Autism is supported according to their own needs and preferences, great benefits may ensue for all concerned. Just as we value our individuality with our needs and choices, the child or adult with Autism is enabled to live their life, work and play—in their own way.

