

Neurodivergence Awareness

Christine Almaraz

State Commissioner – Diversity & Inclusion

February 2025



Neurodivergence

- Neurodivergence is the term for when someone's brain processes, learns, and/or behaves differently from what is considered "typical" (aka "neurotypical").
- Formerly considered a problem or abnormal, it is now understood that neurodivergence isn't an illness or disability but rather a different method of learning and processing information. However, some of which become disabilities when support and intervention are not provided.
- Neurodivergence applies to ASD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia. Other types of neurodivergence include Tourette's, dyspraxia, synesthesia, dyscalculia, Down syndrome, epilepsy, and chronic mental health illnesses such as bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, borderline personality disorder, anxiety, and depression.





Many neurodiverse conditions can often exist together.

This picture illustrates how the conditions can overlap.

What is Autism (ASD)?

Autism is “different”, not disordered, defective or dysfunctional.

Autism is a neurodiverse condition that describes a *different* way of thinking, learning, relating, sensing, perceiving, moving, and empathising. Autism is called a spectrum as, although all individuals will have challenges, it will affect them in very different ways.

No two ASD people will have the same challenges.

If you meet one autistic person, you've met one autistic person.

A diagnosis of Autism explores:

- Social Interaction and Understanding
- Communication
- Imagination / Play
- Sensory Processing
- Gross and Fine Motor Skills
- Obsessions / rituals and routines
- Executive Function



That is why I would like to explain what is meant by 'spectrum' when we talk about the 'autistic spectrum'.

Sometimes when people think of this word, they think of the autism spectrum as being like this:



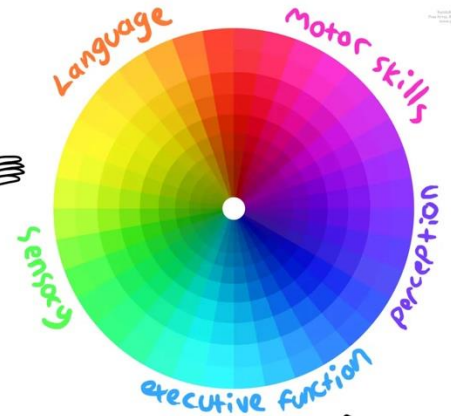
A very linear looking 'spectrum', which gives the impression that people range from being 'a little autistic' to 'very autistic'.

Hm. How can you be 'a little autistic'?

It's that vague language that I always find confusing.

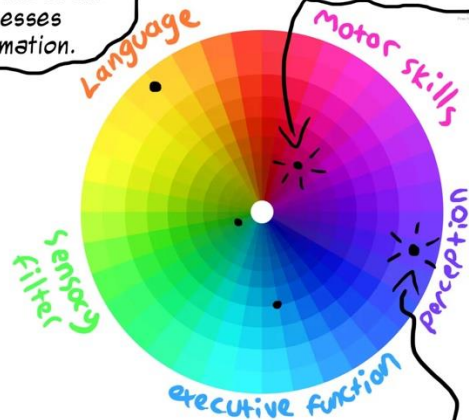


The truth is though, someone who is neurodiverse in some areas of their brain, will also be no different to your average person in other areas of their brain.



You see, the autistic spectrum looks something more like this.

The spectrum consists of many different 'traits', or ways in which the brain processes information.



Some traits create difficulties in every day life. (hence being diagnosed)

But also many traits are useful in every day life.

Each person with autism will have a set of traits all in different areas of the spectrum. The areas where they don't have a trait will function no differently to a neurotypical brain, but may be affected by circumstances. In example, I am good at making conversation (language). But I get sensory overload in loud and crowded spaces, which then makes conversation very hard for me.

And so, another autistic person might be very happy in loud crowds, but find conversation hard in general.

You could say I'm just a real 'party animal'!

You can see with this spectrum than, that not every autistic person has 'savant skills'. Or that someone who can't communicate verbally might still understand what you're saying, but just need a different way to communicate, such as sign language.

It shows how not every autistic person acts the same way, and we are all capable of varying strengths and weaknesses.

ADHD

A persistent pattern of inattention and / or hyperactivity – impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

Inattention

- can affect schoolwork, tasks and play, conversations, following instructions, organisation skills, avoidance or dislike of tasks that require mental effort, losing things, distracted, forgetful.

Hyperactivity and impulsivity

- fidgets, taps hands or feet or squirms in seat, leaves seat when seating is expected, runs about or climbs where it is not appropriate, unable to play or take part in activities quietly, “on the go” or ”driven by a motor”, talks excessively, blurts out, has trouble waiting for their turn, interrupts or intrudes on others (conversations or games).
These impact school, home, leisure / sporting activities.



PDA – Pathological Demand Avoidance

PDA is a profile that describes those who are driven to avoid everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent. This demand avoidance is often (but not always) accompanied by high levels of anxiety.

Features include:

- resists and avoids ordinary life demands
- uses social strategies as part of avoidance, for example, distracting, giving excuses
- appears sociable, but lacks some understanding
- experiences excessive mood swings and impulsivity
- appears comfortable in role play and pretence
- displays obsessive behaviour that is often focused on other people.



THE AUTISM ICEBERG

WHAT PEOPLE THINK AUTISM IS

Really smart
A tragedy
Caused by bad parenting
Only affects boys
Look different
Unintelligent
Can't communicate
Emotionless
Anti-social
An illness or disease
Can't make friends

Wide range of presentations
Sensory differences
Conversational quirks
Social confusion
Excellent long term memory
Socially diverse
Sleeping Issues
Trouble reading social cues
Difficulty making friends
Reliable & Honest
Devoted to routines
Use repetitive language
Original thinking
Strong emotions
Deep focus
Straightforward and direct
Executive dysfunction
Eye for detail

WHAT AUTISM REALLY IS

A graphic demonstrating perceptions and assumptions of ASD. While also showing a more detailed understanding “below the surface”.

WHAT PEOPLE SEE

Forgetful

Frustrated

Clumsy

Can't sit still

She only likes videogames

Doesn't pay attention

Get's in trouble

Sensitive to noise

My baby brother was just born

Sitting still is hard

I have ADHD

I don't get much sleep

I'm pretty creative

I hyperfocus on things I like

I want others to like me

WHAT PEOPLE DON'T SEE

Ableism

Ableism is a type of discrimination which favours people without disabilities, and as a consequence, harms disabled people. It can present in many different forms such as policies, society values, people's beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

Here are some common types of ableism seen with children:

- An ADHD child is told off for fidgeting and not being able to sit still.
- A child with dysgraphia is told to try harder to improve “untidy” handwriting.
- A child with Down's Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy with unclear speech is asked to constantly repeat themselves & is not supported with an alternative way to communicate (i.e. PECS or DynoVox).
- An Autistic child who needs ANC headphones due to their hyper-sensitivity to noise is told to wear them less so that they can 'get used to' the noise.
- A refusal to make an adjustment for one Scout because of how it might affect the majority non-disabled Scouts.

Behaviour Iceberg

What we see: behaviours

Crying
Aggression
Anger Yelling Meltdown
Avoidance

Overwhelmed Embarrassed
Sick Anxious Sad
Scared Frustrated
Hungry Tired
Stressed Lonely
Hurt

Look
BENEATH
the surface

twoemb.medium.com

Behaviour Management

- Behaviour management is an important aspect of supporting someone who is neurodivergent.
- Understanding the underlying causes of challenging behaviours: Many behaviours are a result of difficulties with communication, social interactions, or sensory processing. Be aware of anxiety and warning signs.
- Using positive reinforcement: Positive reinforcement is a method of behaviour management that involves reinforcing desired behaviours with something the youth member finds rewarding.
- Creating a structured environment: Having a predictable routine and clear rules can help reduce anxiety and challenging behaviours.

- Teaching new skills: Teaching neurodivergent individuals new skills and providing opportunities for them to practice those skills can help reduce challenging behaviours.
- Collaboration with a team: Behaviour management strategies for neurodivergent individuals should involve a team approach, including the individual with autism, parents and leaders.
- Monitoring and Recording the Behaviour: Keeping a record of the behaviour can help in developing an effective behaviour management strategy and also measure its effectiveness.

I am autistic

I make mistakes
And don't know
I say the wrong things
Unintentionally

Please be understanding
And tell me
When I mess up
(Gently)

It's the kindest thing you could do
So I don't have to
Go on wondering
Worrying and hurting

My intent is always good
My heart means well
Please know this

Thank you.

Case Study

- You are at Cuboree as a kitchen helper. It is day three lunchtime and the adults in your camp are starting to feel tired, including yourself. The kids are very noisy as they come into the dining tent and some are screaming. The adults are asking them to be quiet, only some of the youth are listening. You notice one adult raising their voice to be heard over the kids.
- One particular youth member is not listening and continues yelling then starts bouncing on their toes beside the table. You know this youth member is neurodivergent and likely overwhelmed by the noise, using stimulation to self regulate. Another adult in the dining tent tells the youth member to stop moving around and yelling or they won't get any lunch. They then threaten the youth member that not only will they not eat, but no one at their table will eat either.
- What do we do here? How could we handle this better?

Triggers for Anxiety

- The possibility of making a mistake and work not being perfect
- Too much noise, movement and chaos in the room
- A change in routine or expectation
- Transitioning to a new activity
- A new social situation without a 'social script' of what to do and say
- Too many demands, choices and questions
- Specific auditory, tactile and visual experiences
- Someone breaking the social or unit rules
- Having to wait or hurry up

- The fear of being bullied, teased, rejected or humiliated by peers
- Observing an argument or conflict
- The leader being anxious or agitated
- Having to socialise or work with someone you do not know
- Being asked to explain your thinking and feelings
- Not being able to complete an activity
- Experiencing or observing social injustice and an event perceived as 'not fair'
- Being considered as stupid

Meltdowns

Any of the previous points can lead to someone becoming overwhelmed and having a 'meltdown' or 'shutdown'. It could be a build up of a few little things or their inability to handle a single issue. This can be physically and emotionally debilitating for them (and you).

It may appear to be "Just a Temper Tantrum", but it is best to allow the scout a quiet area, so they can calm down and regain control. Do not try to troubleshoot and fix the problem during the meltdown. Wait until afterwards and see if you can ascertain the cause to prevent it in the future.

Be patient and don't judge or react negatively. Calmly ask if they are OK and give them some time and space to recover.

Signs your Scout has been triggered

- Busy hands (flapping, shaking) or stimming
- Off task
- Raised voice OR non-communicative
- Unwilling to make eye contact
- Withdraws from the group
- Pacing

- Non compliance
- Stares into space
- Increase in breathing rate
- Increase in questioning
- Distracting other scouts
- Throwing/hitting things
- Plus a million other signs

NEVER, in the history of calming down has anyone ever calmed down by being told to calm down!

During a meltdown

Stand Back!

If you don't, the Scout may move into fight or flight mode:

- They may run (pre-arrange a safe zone for them to run too - tell them if they feel they need to run, run but go into the safe space)
- They may throw objects causing injury to themselves, other scouts or leaders
- They may hit another Scout or Leader
- They may damage property

During a meltdown

Do:

- Allow the Scout access to doorways
- Give them scrap paper/tissue boxes to destroy
- Keep your hands away from them
- Allow the Scout to run and watch them from a safe distance
- Encourage other Scouts to move away from them
- Remain calm & regulated



During a meltdown

- Be respectful and empathetic
- Provide cues of safety
- Limit your talking - Scout may not hear a lot
- Respect their communication
- If they wants space, move away slowly and respectfully
- Stay low and slow – move to the Scout's level, match speed/rhythm to the Scout

When I am in a meltdown, I can't respond to what people are telling me and I can't problem solve, because I cannot process what is going on around me.



Listen to what the Scout needs

Are they asking for:

- Space from you or the unit?
- A body break?
- Silence
- The restoration of what changed?
- Understanding

Once they are in a calm state, help the scout to communicate their needs & what helps them to recover:

- Funny videos?
- iPad games?
- Cooking?
- Body break?
- Widgets (small items for their hands to play with)

How can Scouts help Neurodivergent youth?

- ASD Youth often have trouble interacting with other kids and aren't as likely to initiate activities. Scouting gives them an opportunity to do that. They are introduced to and encouraged to interact with other youth, without having to seek out these new social friendships alone.

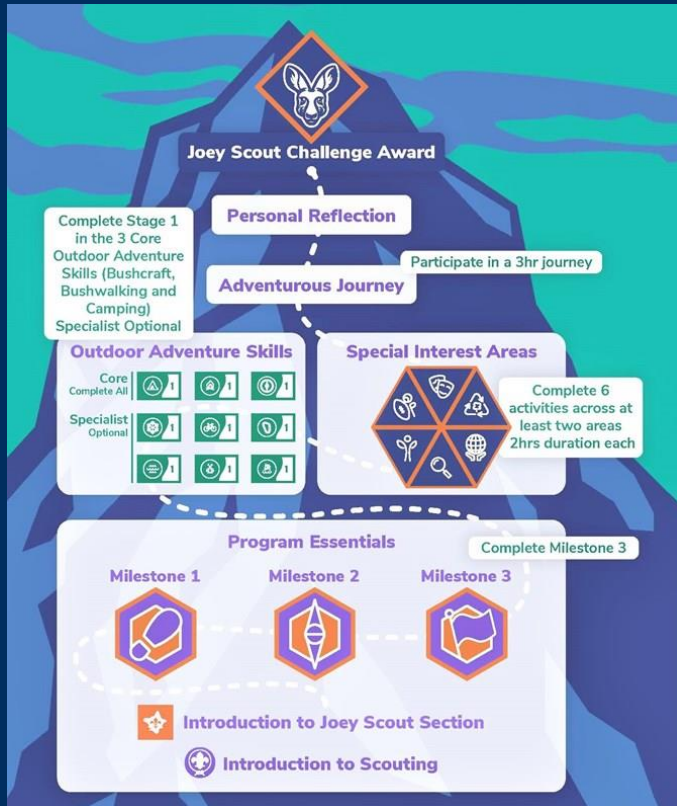


How can Scouts help Neurodivergent youth?



- Many common after school activities can be difficult for autistic youth. Sports can be challenging for someone with coordination problems, or social and communication difficulties. Scouting is an activity that can assist someone with motor, socialisation skills & life management skills.


How can Scouts help Neurodivergent youth?



- Many youth respond well to reward systems. In Scouts we have OAS badges, SIA badges and each section has its own higher achievement award.


How can Scouts help Neurodivergent youth?

- Schedules and routines are very important to some youth. With Scouting, the overall structure and time gives them a chance to accommodate that need. However, within each meeting, there is usually different content, that allows the youth to be introduced to new experiences and ideas that they might not normally encounter.



WEEKLY PLANNER

1ST UPPER GUM TREE CUB SCOUT UNIT



CHALLENGE AREA FOR TONIGHT				PROGRAM CYCLE THEME:		PATROL:	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; font-size: small;"> Community Outdoor Challenge Personal </div>				DATE:		TONIGHTS THEME:	
TIME	ACTIVITY	EQUIPMENT	MILESTONE TASK	YOUTH / LEADER			
7:00PM	OPENING						
8:00PM CLOSING & REVIEW							

SCOUT METHOD

Community involvement
 Learning by Doing
 Nature & the Outdoors
 Promise & Law
 Patrol System
 Symbolic Framework
 Personal Progression
 Youth Leading Adult Supporting

SPICES

SOCIAL
 PHYSICAL
 INTELLECTUAL
 CHARACTER
 EMOTIONAL
 SPIRITUAL




How can Scouts help Neurodivergent youth?



- Because of the difficulty that Autistic people can have with peer relationships, they quite often relate better to adults than peers.
- An adult or an older youth in a leadership position might be someone they can work with closely in many scenarios, especially if they find it difficult to work with peers.

Tips to assist your Scout

- Communicate, communicate, communicate!
– it is essential between everyone –
GL, Leaders, parents and especially
the youth
- Consider asking for more
information on a form. Sometimes
parents don't necessarily think
about useful information until they
see it in B&W.

Support Plan 

Scout Name: _____ Group: _____

STRENGTHS

CHALLENGES

TRIGGERS

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

SENSORY NOTES / STRATEGIES / SUPPORT NEEDED

ANY OTHER INFORMATION

Signed (parent/guardian): _____ Date: _____

- Keep instructions clear & simple - they often need extra time to process information like questions or instructions
- Give warnings about changes to a program - they can feel anxious about unexpected changes, like delays and cancellations. Give 5-minute warnings when an activity is about to change during a program.
- Consider images/visual aids (i.e. for packing lists)






- Give a warning about a program that might cause sensory issues (i.e. a noisy night). Many can find noise, bright lights and smells distressing. Lots of little things can add up to a sensory overload.

- Avoid sarcasm and be literal – say what you mean. Sometimes they may not understand and get upset by what you say (i.e. it's raining cats & dogs, zip your lips).
- Don't shout
- Use visual and practical examples to your Scouts – it makes it a lot easier for them to understand than just listening
- Don't use times on a schedule. If you go over by a minute they'll let you know about it.

"In my day, they didn't have all this Autism and ADHD and stuff"

fb/itsamaddadworld

I think what you mean is that people used to go undiagnosed and get absolutely no help and were forced to suffer through their lives because they had zero support or understanding.

A vertical strip on the left side of the slide features several white silhouettes against a blue background, depicting various Scout activities: a person climbing a rock face, a person on a boat, and a person in a canoe.

The sport in Scouting is to find the good
in every boy and develop it.

– *Sir Robert Baden Powell*

Scouts Australia Resources

[Factsheet-1-Understanding-Neurodiversity.pdf](#)

[Factsheet-2-Supporting-Neurodiverse-Youth-Members.pdf](#)

[Factsheet-3-Supporting-Neurodiverse-Adult-members.pdf](#)

[Parent-Carer-Conversation-Framework-Initial-Conversation.pdf](#)

[Parent-Carer-Conversation-Framework-Ready-to-Scout-Conversation.pdf](#)

[Template-Ready-to-Scout-Plan.docx](#)

[Template-Supporting-Youth-Plan.docx](#)

<https://scouts.com.au/members/key-resources/>



A lways
U nique
T otally
I nteresting
S ometimes
M ysterious

Thank you

**If you need further information,
please email me at:**

sc.diversity@scoutsvictoria.com.au



References

- ASPECT
- Emma Forward – Forward Psychology
- LANKuk
- Dr Mona Delahooke <https://monadelahooke.com/>
- <https://the-art-of-autism.com/understanding-the-spectrum-a-comic-strip-explanation/>
- <https://www.autisticqualia.com/2021/10/13/adhd-vs-autism-simplified/>
- <https://scouts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SDG10-Celebrating-Neurodiversity-in-Scouting-AusScout-Nov19.pdf>
- Twinkl
- Australian Teacher Aide
- Richard Eisenmajer - the ASD Clinic
- <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/picture/2017/may/25/understanding-autism-part-one-jack-and-rosie>
- <http://marywashicomics.net/article/autism-speaks-through-pj/>
- https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kJAdct2P8U7_-auih_QWzh0R7hbRXIsTgb1CYly7vD0/edit?hl=en_US#
- <https://tapestry.info/education-hub.html>
- Declarativelanguage.com
- Dr Nick Walker <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>

Case studies are fictional but based on actual Child Safety reports to Scouts Victoria.
All names, gender, locations and events have been changed to protect privacy.