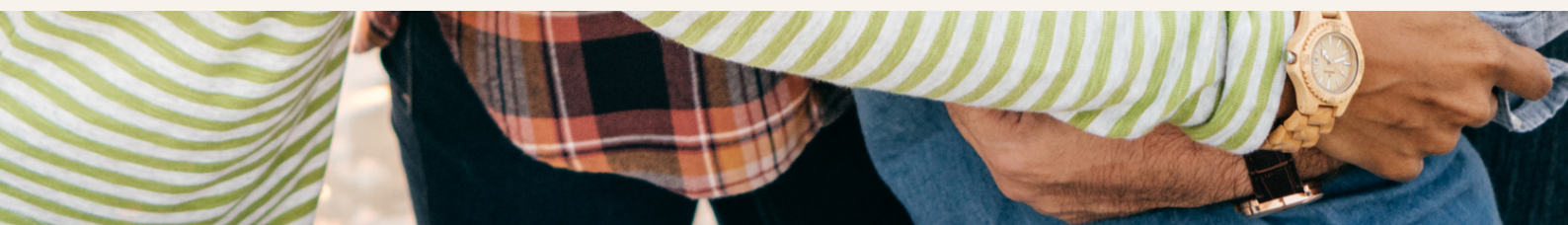




Understanding Autism: A Family's Journey

Resources for curious families who are beginning to explore
neurodiversity and autism.





Hi, I'm Nat!

As an AuDHD person, and mum to my own beautiful AuDHD daughters, I have lived experience of that crazy, beautiful ride that is life as a neurodivergent human. I followed my Splns* and used the power of monotropism* to complete a Bachelor of Education + Master of Speech Pathology.

I've thoroughly enjoyed 20 years of celebrating and supporting neurodivergent people in education and therapy settings. I believe that all neurotypes are beautiful and am working towards co-creating a world that values and celebrates different ways of communicating, thinking and being.

I enjoy running my own small private practice where I offer neurodiversity affirming autism assessments, therapy, parent coaching and clinical mentoring.

**Spln - Special Interest*

**Monotropism - A flow state that allows sustained focus and attention to something of interest, without distraction.*

Contents

Why the increase in autism diagnoses?	1
The autism 'label': Shifting from stigma to self love	4
Unlearning autism: Links to reshape your understanding of the autistic neurotype	6
Should I tell my child they're autistic? A neurodiversity affirming perspective	9
Starting the Conversation: Talking to Your Child About Autism	13
Autistic Strengths Cards	15

Why the increase in autism diagnoses?

Our understanding of autism has changed dramatically in recent years. Once thought of as a condition or disorder that impacted a person in terms of what they can't do, autism is now recognised as a distinct neurotype, a natural variation in how brains process and engage in the world around them.



So why are there so many more autistic people being diagnosed? For the same reason there seem to be so many more stars in the sky since we invented telescopes.

The stars were always there. We simply developed better tools to see them. Likewise, autism diagnoses have increased in recent years, with a broader range of people now being recognised and identified. Two key factors have contributed to this: changes to the diagnostic criteria and a deeper understanding of internalised or less visible presentations of autism.

The DSM-5

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders is the most commonly used tool to identify and diagnose autism. It provides a set of criteria that looks at patterns in how a person thinks, communicates, and experiences the world, through the lens of the autistic neurotype.

In 2013, the DSM-IV was revised to better reflect emerging research and improve consistency in autism diagnosis worldwide. This updated version is known as the DSM-5, and it remains the criteria used today. The following changes were introduced to better reflect the many ways the autistic neurotype can present:

Four diagnostic labels were merged into one. Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder (not otherwise specified), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Autistic Disorder were combined under the one diagnosis, Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Sensory differences were included. For the first time, sensory experiences became part of the official criteria. These include things like (but not limited to):

Why the increase in autism diagnoses?

- Being very sensitive to sounds, smells, or touch
- Sensitivities to the taste, texture, and smell of food
- Seeking out sensory experiences like movement or deep pressure
- Difficulty recognising internal cues like hunger, thirst, pain or the need to use the toilet

The separate diagnostic criteria of Social Interaction and Communication were combined into a single criterion, Social Communication, as understanding grew around how closely these areas are linked for Autistic people

A “support needs” scale was added. It was recognised that the experience of Autistic people is incredibly diverse, with support needs varying from person to person. So now, the diagnosis includes levels including:

- Level 1: needs some support
- Level 2: needs substantial support
- Level 3: needs very substantial support

These levels aren’t about how “autistic” someone is, instead, they guide the kind of support that might be helpful for them.

It was clarified that, while signs of autism must have been present in early development, traits may not have been obvious at the time. Some traits only become noticeable later, especially when social or learning demands increase, such as starting school or as friendships and social dynamics mature.

In earlier editions, co-diagnoses like Autism and ADHD were not permitted, meaning a person couldn’t be formally diagnosed with both. The revised DSM-5 now recognises that a neurotype can include a combination of traits, allowing for a dual diagnosis of Autism and ADHD (often informally referred to as AuDHD).

Why the increase in autism diagnoses?

Internalised autism and high masking profiles

Another of the key reasons more people are being diagnosed as autistic today is because we've become better at recognising internalised and less visible presentations. These profiles have always existed but until recently, they were often missed, misunderstood, or misdiagnosed.

For many autistic people, their traits may not match the traditional or stereotypical picture of autism. Instead of outward behaviours, their differences are more subtle or internalised, and they may work very hard to mask or camouflage their autistic traits to blend in with peers or meet social expectations. An internalised experience of autism can mean that a person may not even be aware they are masking, a process known as unconscious masking, until they are supported with the opportunity to reflect and recognise their internal experience.

Internalised autism might show up as:

- Anxiety
- Perfectionism
- Social exhaustion, emotional meltdowns or shutdowns after school, work or social events
- Preference for being in control & difficulty coping with change or unpredictability
- More subtle stimming or other natural self-regulation behaviours (eg: chewing gum, tapping foot, twirling hair, rubbing fingers)
- More mainstream special interests (fashion, TV shows, hair, animals)
- Being seen as shy, quiet, sensitive, or well-behaved, while internally overwhelmed
- Strong empathy and social motivation, paired with social confusion or burnout

Because a high masking individual can often appear to be coping, or because they don't present with more obvious autistic traits, their need for support can go unseen, sometimes for years. But with growing understanding, clinicians are now better equipped to identify how these internalised traits meet the diagnostic criteria.

The best is yet to come

While this deeper understanding of autism is a welcome advancement, many autistic people and professionals within the neurodiversity space acknowledge that the deficit-based language of the DSM-5 still falls short in capturing the strengths, identity, and positive lived experiences of Autistic individuals. Many diagnosticians, while following the DSM-5 criteria, choose to share their clients' stories through the strength-based lens of the neurodiversity-affirming paradigm. It is hoped that future revisions of the DSM will reflect this approach more fully.

The autism 'label': Shifting from stigma to self love

For many parents, their understanding of autism has been shaped by deficit-based social conditioning from their own childhoods and into adulthood so it makes sense that if you have been conditioned to see autism as a collection of deficits that negatively influence how others perceive you, or place limits on what you may achieve, you might want to shield your child from that label.



But this perspective is shifting. We now understand that an autistic brain is not a broken or disordered version of a neurotypical brain, but a different neurotype altogether. When we look at the autistic neurotype as a difference, not a deficit, we open ourselves up to recognising that autistic people hold many strengths, have the capacity to contribute to our world in rich and meaningful ways, and are driven by connection and belonging. And when autistic people are empowered to be their authentic selves, they can truly thrive.

With this perspective, as a parent, you will recognise all of the positive ways autistic traits show up in your child's life and the ways they make them uniquely who they are. All of those beautiful parts of your child that you love, their deep passions, quirky sense of humour, focus on the minutiae and tiny moments of beauty, sensitivity, creativity, honesty, or unique way of seeing the world, are not separate from Autism. They are intertwined with the way your child experiences, understands, and moves through the world as an autistic person.

When a child grows up with a deep understanding of themselves in a home that openly recognises and celebrates their differences, they are far more likely to develop self-acceptance, lean into their strengths and passions, advocate for their needs, and move through life with confidence and authenticity. Ultimately, it is this strong sense of self, not the absence of a label, that allows autistic people to thrive and challenge the limits society may once have placed on them.



The autism 'label': Shifting from stigma to self love

Where to start

If you do find yourself hesitant to share your child's diagnosis with them, it can be helpful to gently examine where that hesitation comes from. For many parents, fear around the word "autism" was never consciously chosen, but inherited through decades of cultural messaging that framed autism as something tragic, limiting, or inherently negative.

One of the most powerful things a parent can do, then, is become curious. Read the research emerging from the neurodiversity movement. Listen to the lived experiences of Autistic people. Spend time with perspectives that challenge the narrow, deficit-based narratives many of us absorbed growing up. Often, it is within this process that parents begin to discover the richness, insight, creativity, and humanity within the autistic community. They begin to see that autistic people can live deeply meaningful and rewarding lives, contributing to the world in ways that are thoughtful, innovative, and transformative.

When we are able to speak openly and positively about autism, we open our children's worlds to the understanding, community, resources, and connections that can help them build a strong sense of self, embrace who they are, and move through life with confidence, authenticity, and belonging.

Unlearning autism: Links to reshape your understanding of the autistic neurotype

We once thought the Earth was flat. Now we know the Earth is round. We once thought there was no place for women in politics, we didn't have the right to vote. Now, women don't just vote, they run countries. We once bought and owned collections of music albums. Now, we don't own albums but subscribe and stream music instead.



We once thought there was one type of brain and if behaviours deviated from the 'norm' that brain was disordered. Now, we know our world is made up of different brains (neurotypes) and celebrate diverse ways of thinking and being.

Like all paradigm shifts, embracing a new understanding of Autism begins with curiosity and a willingness and openness to challenge old assumptions. The resources below offer an opportunity to move beyond outdated assumptions and towards a richer understanding of Autism and the diverse experiences of Autistic people.

Podcasts

[Uniquely Human The Podcast](#)

[The Autistic Culture Podcast Network](#)

[Divergent Conversations](#)

[The Neurodiversity Podcast](#)

[Born to Be Free: Supporting Neurodivergent Clients to Learn, Play, Thrive](#)

[The Neurodiverse Classroom](#)

Websites

[Neuroclastic](#)

[Yellow Ladybugs](#)

[Reframing Autism](#)

[Onwards & Upwards Psychology](#)

[Explaining Brains](#)

[Neurowild](#)



Unlearning autism: Links to reshape your understanding of the autistic neurotype

Online Courses

[Onwards & Upwards Parent Courses](#)

[Ausome Training – Parent Resources & Courses](#)

Books to Read With Children

[Some Brains by Nelly Thomas](#)

[Being Eve by Em Hammond \(Neurowild\)*New!](#)

[The Brain Forest by Sandhya Menon](#)

[The Rainbow Brain by Sandhya Menon](#)

[My Body's Power Pack by Sandhya Menon](#)

[Different Like me: My book of autism heroes by Jennifer Elder](#)

[Square Me, Round World by Chelsea Sarah Luker](#)

[A Different Sort of Normal by Abigail Balfe](#)

[Awesome Autistic Go-To-Guide by Yenn Purkis](#)

[Spectrum Girls Survival Guide by Sienna Castellon](#)

[Mrs Speechie Autism Handbook for Kids](#)

Books for Parents and Caregivers to Read

[Talking with your child about their autism diagnosis by Raelene Dundon](#)

[Sincerely, Your Autistic Child by Emily Paige Ballou et al.](#)

[Mrs Speechie Autism Handbook](#)

[Supporting Autistic Girls by Yellow Ladybugs](#)

[Unmasking Autism by Devon Price](#)

[Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism by Barry Prizant](#)

[Different, Not Less by Chloe Hayden](#)

[The Whole-Brain Child by Daniel J. Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson](#)

[Raising Human Beings by Ross W. Greene](#)



Unlearning autism: Links to reshape your understanding of the autistic neurotype

Instagram

[@neurowild_](#)

[@onwardsandupwardspsy](#)

[@learnplaythrive](#)

[@theautismdad](#)

[@neuroinclusion](#)

[@whileyouwonder](#)

[@nd_speechie](#)

[@play.learn.chat](#)

[@sensory.slp](#)

[@yellowladybugs_autism](#)

[@geeonthespectrum](#)

[@pete_wharmby_books](#)

[@autismlevelup](#)

[@omgimneurospicyaf](#)

[@speechdude](#)

[@rdorseyslp](#)

[@the_audhd_speechie](#)

[@amandamosespsychology](#)

[@autism_sketches](#)

[@chloeshayden](#)

[@neurodivergent_lou](#)

Should I tell my child they're autistic? A neurodiversity affirming perspective

While it might feel gentler to speak only about a child's individual traits without naming autism directly, doing so can unintentionally leave a child without the broader framework needed to truly understand themselves. Autism is not simply a disconnected collection of traits, quirks, or challenges. It is a neurotype that shapes the way a person experiences the world.



When children are supported to understand their autistic neurotype, it allows them to make sense of their experiences in a more cohesive way. It connects them to a wider community of people and empowering resources. Rather than feeling like they are alone in their differences, they begin to realise there are many others who think, feel, and experience the world in similar ways. To feel seen and understood in this way can be incredibly powerful ([meet members of the autistic community here](#)).

The power of family

Research consistently shows that the family environment plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's values, beliefs, and sense of identity. When you not only share but celebrate your child's neurotype, reflect openly on the strengths of your neurodivergent family, honour sensory, cognitive, and social differences, and model self-love and self-advocacy, you are helping to build a healthy and positive values system through which your child understands and sees themselves.

Your child will encounter a range of messages about autism from the outside world through peers, school, media, and broader society, and these messages can shape their beliefs and values around what autism means. If those beliefs are built on a deficit-based view, it can become much harder for them to understand, accept, or feel positively about their own traits and experience. A deficit-based view of autistic traits also drives a heavy reliance on masking to fit in. The constant effort to appear "typical" can be exhausting and often results in meltdowns, burnout, identity confusion, and a diminished sense of self-worth.

Should I tell my child they're autistic? A neurodiversity affirming perspective

By creating a home environment where autism is understood, accepted, and spoken about with warmth and respect, you give your child something incredibly protective: a strong foundation from which they can interpret the world around them. While you cannot control every message they receive from society, you can help shape the lens through which they process this information. A child who grows up feeling understood, valued, and safe to be their authentic self is far more likely to carry that sense of worth and self-confidence with them into the world.

Shifting from shame to understanding

Understanding autism through a neurodiversity affirming lens allows both children and the adults around them to replace shame with understanding. Experiences that may once have been viewed as “wrong” begin to make sense in the context of a differently wired nervous system navigating a world that was not designed with it in mind. This shift creates the foundation for empathy, meaningful support, self-understanding, and ultimately, a stronger sense of self-worth.

They are not “naughty” for finding it hard to engage in class. Their brain may need interest-based learning, a sense of felt safety, movement, and support for sensory needs.

They are not “having a tantrum.” They may be experiencing a meltdown caused by sensory, cognitive, or social overload, and in those moments, what they need most is safety, understanding, and co-regulation from a trusted adult.

They are not “socially awkward.” They simply have a different communication and social style to the neuro-majority around them. When they meet their neurokin, others who socialise, communicate and connect in similar ways, they'll thrive!

“I Know I’m Different”

Children often recognise their differences long before they have the language to explain them. Many autistic children are acutely aware that certain things seem easier for other people, whether that be making friends, tolerating noisy environments, coping with change, or keeping up with the social and cognitive demands of school.

Should I tell my child they're autistic? A neurodiversity affirming perspective

In the absence of understanding, children often begin to create their own explanations for these differences: "I'm weird," "I'm bad at things," "I'm too sensitive," or "Something is wrong with me."

For many autistic people, understanding their neurotype does not create a sense of difference, it relieves the confusion and shame that can grow when difference exists without explanation. It replaces self-blame with self-understanding and allows children to see themselves through a lens of compassion.

Supporting Advocacy

Understanding autism also has very practical implications. It helps children, families, and educators better understand what supports, environments, and accommodations allow a child to feel safe, regulated, and able to thrive.

Rather than expecting a child to continually push beyond their nervous system's capacity in order to meet neurotypical expectations, understanding their neurotype opens the door to supports and accommodations that genuinely fit the child.

When children understand how their brain and nervous system work, they are far more able to recognise their needs, advocate for themselves, and build a life that supports their wellbeing rather than constantly working against it.

What the Research Says

Emerging research suggests that autistic people who understand their neurotype earlier in life often report better long-term wellbeing and quality of life in adulthood. Researchers believe this may be because early understanding provides children with a framework for self-understanding, access to appropriate support, and protection against years of internalising shame or confusion about why they experience the world differently.

In contrast, many autistic adults diagnosed later in life describe growing up feeling fundamentally "wrong," often blaming themselves for struggles that were never understood through the lens of autism. While receiving a diagnosis later in life can be profoundly validating and healing, many also speak about the grief of not having had that understanding earlier.

Should I tell my child they're autistic? A neurodiversity affirming perspective

Importantly, studies exploring autistic identity have also found that a more positive understanding and integration of one's autistic identity is associated with improved wellbeing, participation, and quality of life.

Together, this research highlights something deeply important: Identifying as Autistic is not limiting. For many people, it is the very thing that allows self-understanding, self-acceptance, and self-love to grow.

Research Articles

- Davies, J., Cooper, K., Killick, E., Sam, E., Healy, M., Thompson, G., Mandy, W., Redmayne, B., & Crane, L. (2024). Autistic identity: A systematic review of quantitative research. *Autism Research*, 17(5), 874-897. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.3105>
- Lamash, L., Sagie, D., Selanikyo, E., Meyer, S., & Gal, E. (2023). Autism identity in young adults and the relationships with participation, quality of life, and well-being. Preprint. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4467013>
- Oredipe, T., Kofner, B., & Gillespie-Lynch, K. (2023). Does learning you are autistic at a younger age lead to better adult outcomes? A participatory exploration of the perspectives of autistic university students. *Autism*, 27(1), 200-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221086700>

Starting the Conversation: Talking to Your Child About Autism

When it comes to sharing an autism diagnosis with your child, you don't need the perfect words. What matters most is how the message is shared - with warmth, positivity, and curiosity.

Use positive, affirming language

Help them understand that being autistic means their brain sees, feels, and

processes the world in unique ways. Often, young children connect most easily with their autistic neurotype when conversations begin with their strengths, interests, and personal qualities. These Autistic Strengths Cards can be a helpful way to open up this discussion.



Connect to their lived experience

"You know you have expert level knowledge of stick insects right? Autistic brains are amazing at deep diving on a subject and learning everything there is to know about it."

"You know how you love to organise all of your soft toys before you go to bed? That's something a lot of autistic kids like to do, sorting and organising can help you feel calm and really good inside."

As your conversations continue over the days, weeks, and months ahead, you can gradually explore some of the challenges that come with being autistic. This includes helping your child understand that many difficulties arise not because there is something wrong with them, but because they are navigating a world that has largely been designed around neurotypical ways of thinking, communicating, learning, and socialising. Understanding this can help children approach their challenges with self-compassion rather than self-blame.

"Man, I'm sorry you got in trouble for not wanting to come in from lunch today. It can be really hard for autistic people to transition from something fun. How about we organise a chat with your teacher to help her understand that."

"Thanks for telling me you're overwhelmed – that makes a lot of sense. We have had a really busy day today and it can be hard for an autistic brain to have a day full of activities without any downtime to recover. Let's spend the rest of the day chilling at home and resting."



Starting the Conversation: Talking to Your Child About Autism

Reduce the social load

Talking about their neurotype and recent assessment might feel like a vulnerable conversation for your child. Reducing the social and sensory load by reducing the need for eye contact can be really helpful and support wellbeing and engaged conversation. This could look like snuggled up on the couch, or in bed, both looking ahead, sitting side by side doing some craft or lego together, or playing catch or going for a walk outside while you chat.

Connect as neurokin

You might not have a diagnosis yourself but the heritability of autism is high (estimated between 70–90% depending on the research). So while you might not carry a formal label, chances are you share some traits with your child. And nothing builds a stronger sense of self than the feeling of belonging that comes from knowing the people who love you most understand and experience the world in similar ways. You might like to connect as neurokin by exploring the Autistic Strengths cards together!

Keep the conversation going

Don't think of it as a one-time “big talk.” Layer the information over time, creating a safe, open space for ongoing reflection, discussion and questions as they grow.

You're not on your own

A neurodiversity affirming psychologist, speech pathologist, or occupational therapist can support and guide you in sharing your child's diagnosis and in creating a home environment that embraces neurodiversity. There are also many wonderful neurodiversity affirming resources available to help your child build understanding and confidence in who they are. You can find some resources [here](#).

Autistic people all share a number of different traits. How those traits are experienced is unique to each person. We can consider autistic traits as neutral, neither good nor bad, they are simply the effect of how the brain is structured, wired, and uses chemicals.

The environment can impact how a trait is expressed. For example, the ability to focus deeply on work that is of high interest can be rewarding, regulating and meaningful - that's a strength. If, at school or work, an autistic person is asked to transition away from this deeply focused work, that can be dysregulating, stressful and overwhelming - creating challenge.

These cards were created to help children recognise that the parts of themselves they love, the way they think, notice, create and connect, aren't separate from autism. They exist as part of it. My hope is that this understanding becomes the foundation for a confident, authentic and proud autistic identity.

You might not have a diagnosis yourself but the heritability of autism is high (estimated between 70–90% depending on the research). So while you might not carry a formal diagnosis, chances are you share some traits with your child. And nothing builds a stronger sense of self than the feeling of belonging that comes from knowing the people who love you most understand and experience the world in similar ways.



How to use these cards

You might like to print the autistic strengths cards, cut them out and explore them as a family. Identifying those strengths that resonate with you, those that don't, and the strengths family members share - building that sense of neurokin within your own family.

Autistic Strengths Cards



Autistic Strengths Cards

Different Drummer



You don't just follow the crowd
—you do things in your own
creative way.

Nature Lover



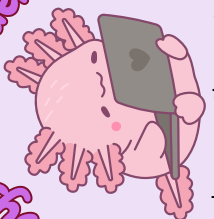
Spending time in the garden, at
the beach, or in the bush
recharges you.

Super Sorter



You enjoy sorting things into
categories and making sure
everything has its place.

System Builder



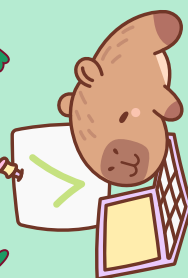
You love creating systems
that make sense and keep
things in order.

Familiar Feels



You love being in places,
wearing clothes, or doing
activities that you know well
and that are comfortable.

Fix It Friend



When something isn't working,
you enjoy figuring out how to fix
it or a better way to do it!

Inventor Brain



You love inventing, building,
designing, or making things.

Time Traveller



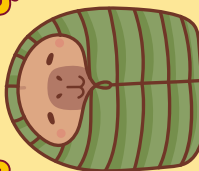
You like to plan ahead to
imagine what needs to
happen next.

List Lover



You enjoy making checklists or
writing things down to help you
remember and stay organized.

Power Saver



Your body tells you when its
time to rest and recharge.

Memory Master



You remember facts, dates,
and information really well,
especially about topics you
love.

Efficiency Expert



You figure out the best way to
do things and stick to what
works.

Autistic Strengths Cards

Prepared Pal



You feel best when you have a plan! You like to be prepared so that you're ready for anything.

Humming Star



Flapping, rocking, tapping, or humming—moving in ways that feel good helps you express and regulate!

Pattern Finder



You notice patterns in numbers, words, ideas, or the world around you—seeing connections others might miss!

Big Heart



You feel things deeply—whether it's love, excitement, or sadness, your emotions are powerful and real!

Laugh a Minute



You love using playful humor to connect with others and make people smile!

Inner Connection



Connection goes beyond eye contact for you, you don't need to be looking to listen and to engage with others.

Curious Questioner



You love asking lots of questions because learning and understanding the world is exciting for you!

Freight Talker



You get straight to the point!

Multitasking Listener



You actually listen better when doing something with your hands — like doodling, fidgeting, or pacing.

Flow State



When something interests you, you can focus so deeply that the rest of the world disappears!

Heart Reader



You can sense other people's emotions, even when they don't say how they feel—you just know!

Big Ideas



Your imagination is HUGE! You love creating stories, ideas, or entire worlds in your mind!