

Understanding Autism

Definition and Legal Status

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. If a cadet has autism, then this should be documented on the Health and Permission form as a disability so that cadet leaders can make the appropriate reasonable adjustments.

Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism isn't an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people also have learning- disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. All people on the autism spectrum learn and develop.

In order for a diagnosis to be made, a person will usually be assessed as having had ongoing difficulties with social communication and social interaction, restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests and sensory differences, since early childhood; to the extent that these "limit and impair everyday functioning".

You can learn more about these areas of difficulty and how you can help support them below.

The Equalities Act – Guidance for Schools

The definition of disability in EqA is broad: a person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

A physical or mental impairment includes learning difficulties, mental health conditions, medical conditions and hidden impairments such as specific learning difficulties, **autism**, and speech, language and communication impairments.

In deciding whether someone is disabled, it is the effect of an impairment that has to be considered. If the impairment has a substantial and long-term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities it may amount to a disability. Substantial is defined as being more than minor or trivial; long-term is defined as a year or more.

Common signs of autism in adults include:

- finding it hard to understand what others are thinking or feeling
- getting very anxious about social situations
- finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on your own
- seeming blunt, rude or not interested in others without meaning to
- finding it hard to say how you feel
- taking things very literally – for example, you may not understand sarcasm or phrases like "break a leg"
- having the same routine every day and getting very anxious if it changes
- Other signs of autism

They may also have other signs, like:

- not understanding social "rules", such as not talking over people
- avoiding eye contact
- getting too close to other people, or getting very upset if someone touches or gets too close to you
- noticing small details, patterns, smells or sounds that others do not
- having a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities
- liking to plan things carefully before doing them

National VPC Statement

It's important to check with the cadet and their parents/carers about the language that they use to talk about their diagnosis, and to take the lead from them. For example, some members may have been given a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, and they prefer to use this term when talking about their diagnosis.

Make sure you know whether the cadet knows about their diagnosis, and whether they're happy to talk about it. It's also important to check how they feel about other people in the unit knowing about their diagnosis too, they may not want anyone else to know, or they may want to tell others about it. This all depends on the individual and their wishes must be respected.

Some people with autism mask their differences. They may copy behaviours from others around them in order to "blend in" and not seem different; this can be exhausting, as it takes constant thought, energy and effort to appear similar to other people.

This more subtle presentation of autism is also a major barrier to professionals recognising autism and understanding the experiences of autistic girls and women who appear to 'blend in' more than boys and men.

Find Related Guidance

Click on the link for [Autism and Mental Health](#) Resources

[Autism, Identity and Me: A Practical Workbook and Parent/Professional Guide to Empower Autistic Children and Young People Aged 10+](#)

DFE Guidance - [Disabled Children and the Equality Act 2010](#): What teachers need to know and what schools need to do