

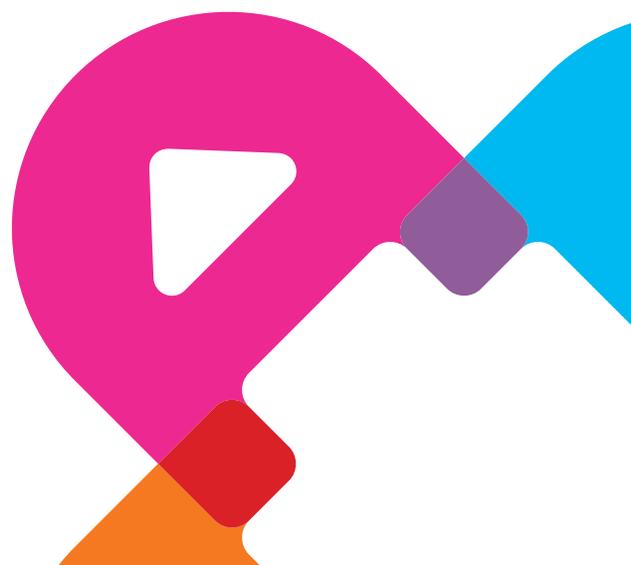
**AUTISM  
CANADA**

**SEE THE SPECTRUM  
DIFFERENTLY**

## **WORDS MATTER**

*A collaborative language and communication  
guide in the autism field*

SEPTEMBER 2016



## COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE AUTISM FIELD

*Autism Canada is a national organization that dedicates itself to facilitating collaboration between the many groups involved, both personally and professionally, in the conversation on autism, all of which have their own perspectives and their own ways of talking about autism. The complexity of this conversation and the diversity of the groups concerned means that dialogue can be difficult at times, and the importance of said dialogue requires that we recognize both a need for clarity and a need for sensitivity to each other's perspectives. In this vein, it is necessary to create a shared language that will ensure a productive, positive discourse, respectful of all relevant parties. It is here that we should explain the principles by which we have chosen this language, principles of nuance, humanization, and empathy.*

**A**utism is a complex issue — one that intersects with many other complicated social issues such as health and wellbeing, education and employment, and acceptance and identity. It is therefore important not to fall prey to hyper-simplistic narratives about autism, both positive and negative. Seeing efforts to understand autism and improve the lives of people living with autism as a “war on autism” frames autism as an enemy, rather than what it is for many people who live with it — a part of their lives, a part of their families, sometimes a blessing, sometimes a trial, but ultimately part of who they are and how they live. At the same time, many people on the autism spectrum do struggle in their day-to-day lives, and this should not be ignored or neglected from our understanding of autism. It is important to acknowledge both the variability of autism and the complexity of our relationships with it.

It is likewise important to recognize the context in which we speak. While there has been a great deal of debate

over ‘person-first’ and ‘condition-first’ terms like ‘adult with autism’ and ‘spectrum adult’, what is ultimately important is that the person is acknowledged. An autistic person, speaking in the first-person, might simply say, “I am autistic,” given that their personhood is self-evident. Similarly, medical terminology such as developmental disability, disorder, and comorbidity, while entirely appropriate within the context of medicine and medical research, is often misused or carries stigmatizing connotations in popular usage. We therefore request that such terms be deemphasized when communicating with a more general audience. The discussion over terminology such as ‘neurotypical’ as a replacement for ‘normal’ and ‘non-autistic’ is still in progress, and it would be premature to say that there is an obvious answer on how to express the idea of non-autistic neurology as one type of human experience rather than the default. Language is a living thing, built and rebuilt by the consensus and the consent of its speakers, and we fully expect the conversation on how to create an inclusive, mutually beneficial dialect to continue into the future.

UNDESIRABLE	PREFERRED LANGUAGE	RATIONALE
Recovery, heal, fix, cure, suffers from autism, incurable, disease, etc.	Improving quality of life, improving social integration, addressing health concerns, accessing support, lifelong condition	<i>One fixes that which is broken. One heals that which is sick. This kind of language makes sense when talking about a broken bone, but not when talking about a complex condition whose 'treatment' predominantly involves teaching skills, removing barriers, providing opportunities, and addressing secondary health concerns.</i>
Suffers from autism	Has autism, is autistic, is on the autism spectrum	<i>To say that one 'suffers' from autism is to make an assumption, one that forwards a narrative that autism is necessarily a negative part of a person's life. A more neutral term is preferred.</i>
Nothing can be done, there is nothing you can do	There are supports available, there are options, improving independence, improving health	<i>Rare is the circumstance in which truly nothing may be done, where no better outcome can be pursued. Supports for people with autism and their families have improved over the past several decades.</i>
War on autism, eliminate, eradicate, etc.	Addressing autism, finding solutions, improving outcomes, helping spectrum adults, helping families	<i>Autism is not an enemy to be defeated – it is a condition that may be improved. It is important to remember the significant impact of negative words on literal-minded autistic people.</i>
Slow, simple, "special", disabled, abnormal	Thinks/understands differently, neurodiverse, neurodivergent, autistic	<i>Euphemisms like 'slow' and 'simple' are inaccurate. There are several forms of intelligence and we should not base our opinions of intelligence on a person's capacity for communication and social interactions. Further, it is usually better to focus on autism as a difference rather than a deficiency.</i>
Can't communicate, mute, suffers from mutism	Has a communication disorder; uses a device to speak; is unable to communicate verbally	<i>Communication is not limited to the spoken word. Body language, sign language, and written/typed language are all ways to exchange information.</i>
"What's your hidden talent?" "Are you a genius?"	"Do you have any special interests?" "What are you interested in?"	<i>Not every autistic is a savant, but everyone has something they're interested in.</i>
Normal looking, not autistic looking, doesn't seem autistic, "You don't look autistic"	"How does autism affect you?" "What accommodations do you need?", "Is there anything I should know to make things easier for you?"	<i>There is no one way to be autistic, and statements like "You don't look autistic" can undermine and delegitimize people with autism by implicitly questioning their identity and whether they deserve the supports they receive for their condition.</i>
Unacceptable behavior, "Behave yourself", "Control your child"	"I don't know what you're trying to tell me, could you explain?" "Do you need help?" be patient and non-judgemental	<i>What we sometimes call 'disruptive' behaviour is often a way of expressing stress, pain, or excitement — or a way of coping with a stressful situation. Empathy is always preferable to judgement.</i>
Co-morbidity (unless used in medical or diagnostic context)	Co-occurring or dual-diagnosis	<i>Co-morbidity is entirely correct as a technical term. However, to the layman, a word containing 'morbid' carries the connotation of something scary or potentially fatal. Co-occurring is a good plain-language equivalent.</i>
Developmentally delayed, neurodevelopmental challenges, neurological disorder (unless used in medical or diagnostic context)	Neurodiverse, neurodivergent	<i>Long, complex strings of medical terminology always sound incredibly serious and solemn and don't necessarily communicate the right tone, even if they are technically medically accurate. Neurodiverse is a far more neutral, far less grave term, while equally correct.</i>

**SPECIAL THANKS TO ALL THOSE  
WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS DOCUMENT.**

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