

Example: Autistic and Non-autistic Communication

Communication is central to connection, advocacy, and problem solving — but even when we speak the same language, we don't all communicate the same way. Autistic and non-autistic people often differ in communication development and language processing, with many Autistics using Gestalt language and non-Autistics favouring analytical styles.

Autistic communication differences have often been seen as deficits, but recent research reframes them as distinct 'autistic communication styles' with both strengths and challenges (Sutherland et al., 2025).

Common differences in autistic and non-autistic communication preferences

Autistic

- Low tolerance for small-talk
- Direct, literal communication
- Less reliance on non-verbal cues
- Need for processing time
- Comfortable with silence
- Information-oriented
- Prefers written conversation
- Object-based conversations



Non-autistic

- Preference for small-talk
- Indirect and nuanced communication
- Use of non-verbal cues
- Expectation of quick responses
- Emphasis on social norms
- High value on eye contact
- Prefers verbal and spontaneous
- Social-based conversations

Understanding Social-Based vs. Object-Based Conversations

Autistic and non-autistic people often differ in how and why they engage in conversation. One key distinction is where individuals look for their **hook** — the entry point — into a conversation. Non-autistics are often comfortable in social-based conversations, while many Autistics may struggle to find their 'in' into a social-based conversation.

Social-Based Conversations

- Purpose: To build connection and maintain relationships through emotional or social exchange.
- Hook: Often found in the person — facial expressions, tone, shared social context, or emotional states.
- Example: Small talk, 'How was your weekend?' 'How are you?' 'How's the fam?'

Object-Based Conversations

- Purpose: To share information, solve problems, or explore topics of mutual interest.
- Hook: Typically found in the topic — an idea, question, or shared interest that sparks focus.

Example: Explaining a system, fact, deep-diving into a passion. 'Did you see Lachie Neale's disposals stats at the game on Sunday? He'll be up for a Brownlow'

All communication is valid

Examples of social and object-based conversations during a job interview

Social-based question:

Interviewer: How was studying psychology at university for you?

Autistic person: *(feeling uncomfortable and pressured to answer a vague question, what part of university, I completed 32 units, shall I give them my grades data, fill with overwhelm, and eventually fumble response like) - 'psychology was good.'*

Object-based question:

Interviewer: I see you did really well at Assessment of Behaviour at university, tell me about the major assignment?

Autistic person: I had to assess a young student with literacy difficulties. I was able to do a deep dive and research the right psychometric tools for her age, taking into account any possible variables that could explain her difficulties. I assessed what she was experiencing, and compared the psychometric results to her peers. I was able to see where her strengths were and where she struggled. With the results of the assessments and observations, I was able to recommend some classroom and home adjustments. I enjoyed the whole process as I enjoy solving problems in a pragmatic approach. I loved gathering data, comparing statistics and forming a great working relationship with everyone involved to support the student.



Common differences in Autistic and non-autistic communication preferences

Autistic Preferences

- **Direct, literal communication** – say what you mean, high value placed on words, prefer others to do the same.
- **Low tolerance for small talk** – often feels superficial or confusing.
- **Preference for clarity and structure** – e.g., agendas, clear expectations.
- **Written or asynchronous communication** – allows time to process and respond.
- **Need for processing time** – pauses are thoughtful, not disinterest.
- **Lower reliance on non-verbal cues** – meaning is mostly conveyed in words.
- **Comfort with silence** – doesn't indicate discomfort or disconnection
- **Monotropic Attention Patterns** – Preferring sustained focus on one topic at a time rather than rapid shifts between subjects. Infodumping.

Non-autistic Preferences

- **Indirect or nuanced communication** – using subtext, tone, and non-verbal cues.
- **High value on eye contact** – seen as a sign of attention and engagement.
- **Preference for small talk** – helps build rapport.
- **Emphasis on social norms** – including politeness, small talk, balanced turn-taking, and unspoken rules.
- **Use of nonverbal cues** – gestures, facial expressions, body language.
- **Expectation of quick responses** – considered part of attentive conversation
- **Multi-Tasked Attention** – Shifting focus between multiple conversations or topics easily rather than deep engagement in one

Communication: Tips for supporting Autistic communication in the workplace

Provide Clear and Direct Instructions

- Avoid vague language or assumptions—be specific about expectations and deadlines.
- *Example:* Instead of “Get this done soon,” try, “Can you please put the red t-shirts out on the sales rack at 4pm.”
- Visual displays of routines, e.g., cafe workers have a visual of making and serving coffees



Use Written Communication

- Provide important information via email, messages, or notes so it can be processed at their own pace.
- *Example:* Share meeting agendas or task lists in writing beforehand.

Allow Processing Time

- Give time for employees to process questions or feedback without pressure for an immediate response.
- *Example:* After a meeting, say, “Take some time to think about what you noticed at this meeting and email me your thoughts later today or tomorrow.”

Reduce Reliance on Small Talk

- Respect preferences for purposeful discussions and avoid excessive informal chit-chat.
- *Example:* Start meetings by diving into the agenda instead of prolonged icebreakers.

Use Literal and Precise Language

- Avoid idioms or ambiguous expressions unless clarified.
- *Example:* Instead of “Let’s hit the ground running,” say, “This morning we will start working on Stage 1 of the project, which is gathering the customer reviews.”

Model and reinforce psychological safety

Example 1: Autistic Adult using a combination of language processing styles at work

Combined Gestalt + Analytical + Visual Processing

Jade is a 20-year-old Autistic adult working in a busy office environment. They use a mix of communication strategies to navigate work life:

- **Gestalt Processing:** Jade often uses memorised or scripted phrases like 'Living the dream!' when casually asked how they're doing. These familiar responses help them manage quick social interactions without overthinking, even when they are in overwhelm.
- **Analytical Processing:** In quieter, low-stress settings, Jade is able to express her internal experience more precisely, such as saying, 'Actually, I'm a bit overstimulated today – the lights are too bright.' They can explain their needs in logical, detail-oriented ways when they feel safe.
- **Visual Processing:** To prepare for meetings and structure their thoughts, Jade uses visual aids like mind maps and diagrams. These help them to plan what they want to say and reduce the pressure of thinking and speaking in real time.

How This Works: Jade flexibly moves between gestalt scripts for social fluency, analytical language for deeper communication, and visual strategies to scaffold their thinking – allowing them to self-advocate and navigate their work environment.

In work settings, Autistic adults may combine gestalt (for efficiency) with analytical processing (for detailed task breakdowns) and visual supports (to structure information).



Different language processing styles

<p style="text-align: center;">Analytical Language Processing (ALP)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Gestalt Language Processing (GLP)</p>
<p>Language is developed through single units, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • single words have single meaning • gradually adds more single words to create a word or sentence <p>more -- more food -- I want more food -- I want an apple please</p>	<p>Language is developed through chunks and intonation. GLP's often hear the melody of language and use it through intonation before any other language skill. Learning communication through chunks often involves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Echolalia (mirrored language - repeating what we've heard in vocabulary and intonation) • gradually combines different gestalts • uses emotion and intonation to communicate rather than the meaning of the words <p>Learns to say 'I want food' as the whole phrase rather than learning learning each word separately.</p>
<p>Focuses on individual components of language (phonemes, morphemes) gradually combining to form phrases and sentences.</p>	<p>Focuses on chunks and learns in whole phrases or scripts.</p>
<p>When learning to read, will break single words into sounds - phonetic learning - and comprehension.</p>	<p>May be hyperlexic - advanced reading skills compared to comprehension - quick to decode words as whole parts but may not fully understand the meaning of the word</p>
<p>Bottom-up processing in acquiring language - the building blocks approach to learning language - mastering the basic units first before combining.</p>	<p>Top-down processing in acquiring language is done through whole words and phrases. These chunks become become the foundation of their communication which they can then gradually modify, combine and adapt as their own natural communication.</p>