



Autism
Alliance of Canada

Alliance canadienne de
l'autisme

Language Guide

11th Annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit

April 2025

Context

The way we use words is powerful and shapes how we see the world. It also affects how we see ourselves and others. People have different opinions about how we should talk about autism. Some say we should use person-first language, like saying “person with autism.” Others prefer identity-first language, such as “Autistic person.” After looking at the research and hearing from Autistic members of Autism Alliance of Canada, and in discussions held at Autism Leadership Summits, we have adopted identity-first language or neutral language.

Although research points to these preferences, it is not yet clear whether such preferences represent a unanimous view, particularly from autistic people. Namely, according to observations in clinical settings, people who prefer an identity centred on the person tend not to talk about their condition at all.

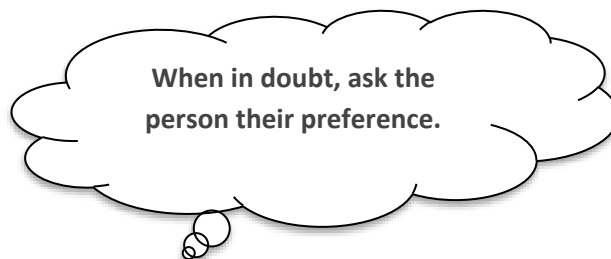
Also, these preferences in anglophones differ from francophones, for example with diagnostic terms and the use of capitalization. While this document does not provide specific comparisons between English and French terms, the guide highlights preferred terms to use in specific contexts.

Consequently, this language guide is a *living* document that aims to follow language evolution as it relates to autism.

Using this guide

This resource offers advice on the preferred language to use in autism. This advice comes from the majority of autistic persons who shared their opinion and experience on inclusion. This guide is a helpful resource that aims to encourage the use of strengths-based language. This guide clarifies preferred language to use in conversations with the Autistic person and in texts about autism.

It's essential to remember that this guide should not override the preferences of the Autistic person you are interacting with; rather, it serves as a flexible tool for respectful communication.



Terminology

At the Canadian Autism Leadership Summit, we prioritize inclusive communication through two key guidelines:

Accessible Language:

- We encourage clear and easily understandable language, accessible to people of all ages and abilities, doing our best to avoid technical terms and informal slang.

Empowering language:

- We advocate for a positive language that respects persons. Our language choices profoundly shape attitudes and perceptions towards Autistic people. It is important to promote inclusion and respect in discussions with and about Autistic people. So, we prefer to say “passions” rather than restricted interests. We acknowledge autism meltdowns rather than saying “crisis”, “suffer”, “outburst”, “aggression” or “fight against autism”.

Capitalization

When it comes to discussing autism, we've learned from our community that it's important to consider how we use written language. Many people prefer to see 'Autistic' capitalized when referring to themselves or their communities. For these people, the capitalization is part of their identity. By using capitalization, we acknowledge this part of their identity and respect their preferences. For instance, 'Autistic person' or 'Autistic community' are examples of this. This mirrors the practice in other communities like the Deaf and Blind communities. However, when discussing traits, conditions, or the broader concept of autism, the community often prefers not to capitalize. This approach, shared by many, allows us to talk about autism respectfully while recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of each person's experience.

The table below provides general recommendations for preferred terms and language considerations regarding autism. Language surrounding autism continues to evolve, and these recommendations are based on insights gathered from the diverse experiences and perspectives of folks on the autism spectrum.

Language Nuances

The table below provides general recommendations on terms and language considerations as these relate to autism. The vocabulary surrounding autism continues to evolve, and these recommendations are based on insights gathered from the diverse experiences and perspectives of Autistic people.

That said, when it comes to diagnosis, the official title for autism remains autism spectrum disorder. However, this medical jargon carries a negative connotation that creates discomfort for the majority of Autistic people. Depending on the context, it is not always possible to eliminate the diagnostic name, nor to avoid diagnostic language that describes signs of autism and levels of support.

The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) was published in 2013. The transition from DSM-4 to DSM-5 marked a major shift in autism diagnosis. Previously separate diagnoses, such as Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder, were merged into a single category: autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Part of the reason for this change was to better reflect the diversity of autistic experiences and facilitate access to services and support.

However, this new classification does not fully reflect the diversity of identities, personal values, and lived experiences within the Autistic community. For example, some individuals diagnosed with Asperger's—before the DSM-5 publication in 2013—received an official diagnosis of this profile. Although this diagnosis has disappeared from the manual, these individuals still exist, and some of them identify with this profile, demonstrating that the Asperger's profile continues to exist within the Autistic community. This speaks to the persistence and validity of this identity for some Autistic persons.

At the same time, other members of the community reject the use of the term Asperger's, due to its history or what it may evoke. These divergent points of view are all legitimate and deserve to be heard and respected. Therefore, this Guide does not aim to resolve all language issues, but rather aims to offer ideas for reflection and recommendations based on the preferences expressed within the community. The guide is intended to be a flexible, inclusive tool that respects the plurality of voices within the Autistic community.

The table below represents examples of preferred, potentially offensive language, and points to consider when in conversation or writing texts.

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Preferred Language	Potentially Offensive Terms	Language Considerations	Examples using Preferred Language
<p>Autism</p> <p>Autism Spectrum</p>	<p>Autism Spectrum Disorder** (except for a written diagnostic report per DSM-5)</p> <p>ASD person</p> <p>Dysfunction</p> <p>Syndrome</p> <p>**While “Autism Spectrum Disorder” especially the 'disorder' part, is not preferred by the Autistic community, it is an official diagnostic term used for Autism in the clinical community.</p>	<p>Autism is often seen through a medical lens, which can lead to negative ideas that it is something that needs fixing or curing.</p>	<p>The diagnosis is Autism or the Autism Spectrum.</p>

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<p>Person-first language</p> <p>e.g. “person with autism”</p> <p>e.g. “person living with autism”</p>	<p>Identity-first language e.g. “Autistic person” or “the Autistic community” (this includes Autistic people only)</p> <p>Neutral language e.g. “person on the autism spectrum”</p>	<p>Using identify-first language highlights that autism is a core part of who a person is, while person-first language implies a separation between the individual and their autism.</p>	<p>‘A total of 125 Autistic adults participated in the study.’</p> <p>‘A total of 125 adults on the Autism Spectrum participated in the study.’</p>
<p>“Restricted interests” (except for a written diagnostic report per DSM-V)</p> <p>“Obsessions”</p> <p>“Special Interests”</p>	<p>“Specialized”</p> <p>“Focused”</p> <p>“Passions”</p> <p>“Intense interests”</p>	<p>Using terms that frame autism in a deficient or pathological context undermine the interests of Autistic people rather than accepting and celebrating their characteristics.</p>	<p>‘The participant has specialized interests in computers and politics.’</p>
Preferred Language	Potentially Offensive Terms	Language Considerations	Examples using Preferred Language
<p>“Co-occurring”</p> <p>“Concurrent”</p>	<p>“Comorbidity”</p>	<p>While autism may accompany other instances of neurodivergence or medical conditions, it's important to note that autism is not a disease.</p>	<p>‘Individuals with co-occurring medical conditions were excluded from the study.’</p>

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<p>“High or low support needs.”</p> <p>“Autistic person needing high support needs.”</p> <p>Describing the specific support needs.</p>	<p>Labels relating to functioning (e.g., high or low functioning)</p> <p>“Special Needs”</p> <p>Labels relating to severity (e.g., mild, moderate or severe)</p>	<p>Remembering that every Autistic person possesses a diverse array of strengths, skills, barriers, and support needs, which may fluctuate over time and in various situations and environments.</p>	<p>‘Persons with sensory and communication support needs.’</p>
<p>Describing specific autistic experiences and characteristics.</p>	<p>“Symptoms”</p> <p>“Impairments”</p>	<p>Using terms such as ‘symptoms’ and ‘impairments’ can make it seem like the experiences of Autistic people are not acceptable.</p>	<p>‘This study included participants who are Autistic and have a heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli.’</p>
<p>“May be Autistic”</p> <p>“At increased likelihood of being Autistic”</p> <p>“Has an autism diagnosis or a diagnosis of autism”</p> <p>“Identifies as Autistic”</p>	<p>“At risk for” or “At risk of”</p> <p>“Suffers from”</p> <p>“Are victims of”</p>	<p>Using terms like “risk” suggests that autism is something to be avoided or prevented.</p>	<p>‘Children with an increased likelihood of being Autistic were also included in the study.’</p>

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“Nonspeaking”	“Nonverbal”	Many nonspeaking people use forms of communication beyond verbal speech.	<p>‘This study focused on the experiences of nonspeaking Autistics.’</p> <p>‘This study focused on the experiences of people on the Autism Spectrum who do not speak verbally.’</p>
Preferred Language	Potentially Offensive Terms	Language Considerations	Examples using Preferred Language
<p>Describing the specific behaviour:</p> <p>“Meltdown” (when uncontrollable behaviour)</p> <p>“Stimming” (when relevant)</p>	<p>“Challenging behaviour”</p> <p>“Disruptive behaviour”</p> <p>“Problem behaviour”</p> <p>“Explosive”</p>	Using specific terms that describe the behaviour, what it may look like, as well as what it may impact help to provide clarity, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the behaviour.	<p>The Autistic youth had a meltdown in the gymnasium.</p> <p>We are trying to stop dangerous stimming and to limit other stimming in public areas.</p>

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As language surrounding autism continues to evolve, it is our responsibility to keep up with the changes and ensure to use language that respects the preferences of the Autistic community. Autism Alliance of Canada is dedicated to fostering inclusive and safe spaces for our members and the broader community. We invite you to [join us](#) in this mission.

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About Autism Alliance of Canada

Autism Alliance of Canada is a Canadian network that is composed of a diverse membership, including Autistic people, caregivers, clinicians, researchers, policy makers, and organizations across Canada.

We work together as a shared leadership movement to champion a National Autism Strategy that ensures Autistic people have equal rights and opportunities for full participation and acceptance in Canadian society. We harness the power of collective impact as an inclusive organization whose members, board of directors and staff reflect our commitment to Autistic participation in all aspects of our work.

About the Canadian Autism Leadership Summit

The Canadian Autism Leadership Summit (“Summit”) serves as a gathering for Autistic people, families, community leaders, decision-makers, and researchers to convene and deliberate on matters crucial to advancing a National Autism Strategy. By coming together, we amplify our voices and strengthen our impact.

Autism Alliance of Canada utilizes the Summit as a platform to drive progress on mutual goals, working towards a more inclusive Canada. Through the development of autism policies that embrace the diverse perspectives of Autistic people across Canada and their loved ones, we strive to create a space that values diversity and inclusion.

Fostering an inclusive atmosphere at the Summit is crucial because it brings together people from various backgrounds and abilities. We strive to create an environment where everyone feels respected and valued. By promoting inclusivity, we want to make sure that everyone feels heard and that diverse perspectives contribute to our collective efforts towards meaningful change.