

Reading with children on the autism spectrum

[Signs of autism](#)

[Eliza's experience](#)

[During the session](#)

[What to look for when choosing books](#)

[Further reading](#)



Sometimes a parent may tell you their child has an autism diagnosis. Or you may find yourself reading with a child who has undiagnosed autistic traits.

Autism is highly individuated, so not all these suggestions will suit all readers. There's a lot of cross-over with generally making reading sessions engaging. But with autism, sessions need to be more tailored to the individuals and always approached with sensitivity.

We're not there to diagnose. If you ever have concerns about a child, as always speak to your Team Leader.

Signs of autism in young children include:

- not responding to their name
- avoiding eye contact
- not smiling when you smile at them
- getting very upset if they do not like a certain taste, smell or sound
- repetitive movements, such as flapping their hands, flicking their fingers or rocking their body; this is known as 'stimming'
- not talking as much as other children
- repeating the same phrases

Signs of autism in older children include:

- not seeming to understand what others are thinking or feeling
- finding it hard to say how they feel
- liking a strict daily routine and getting very upset if it changes
- having a keen interest in certain subjects or activities
- getting very upset if you ask them to do something
- finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on their own
- taking things very literally – for example, they may not understand phrases like "break a leg"

Autism in girls and boys

Autism can sometimes be different in girls and boys. For example, autistic girls may be quieter, may hide their feelings and may appear to cope better with social situations. This means autism can be harder to spot in girls.

Autistic people may...

Find it difficult to filter out less important information. If there is too much, it can lead to 'overload', where no further information can be processed

Have sensory difficulties. This means they may be oversensitive to specific things, like touch, certain textures, light levels or sound

Have difficulty using verbal and non-verbal communication. They may struggle in expressing themselves well, and in understanding gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice

Source: [NHS](#)

During the session

Establish a familiar routine for your reading session.

Keep your language simple and clear. Be aware of pausing to give time to process what you've said, and a chance to think of a response.

Ask the child to participate. Have them turn the page, find something in a picture.

Show the child what you are talking about: Point to pictures, open flaps, touch the printed word, show with an action or a gesture, show or point to a real object.

Manage your volume. Some children won't respond well to louder noises.

You may be reading with a child and notice stimming -- ie repetitive movements, like flapping their hands. This can be something the child does to soothe themselves if they're feeling overwhelmed or overexcited. Don't worry, just go with it -- it's not a sign of distress. Just think about ways to remove some of the sensory overload. You could pause the reading, or give them some physical space.

Emote and try funny voices. If suitable for the child, act out keywords and phrases to help the child decipher meaning. Use your hands and eyes to express yourself, especially where it fits the story.

However, be aware that some children may find this frightening so be cautious until you know the child well.

Ask the child questions about what you read and to point to things in the book. If this is difficult, give the child choices to guide them, e.g. 'Did the character do X or Y?'

Some children may have a short attention span when reading. Try reading for short periods of time, pointing and naming objects as you read, and gradually build up the time you read together.

Be aware of irony, sarcasm, figurative language, rhetorical questions, idioms or exaggeration. If you do use these, explain what is really meant.

Try again next week. Sometimes making headway with a family or reader takes a lot of time. **Be patient and be consistent.**

Eliza's experience

My brother and sister are diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, and had varying degrees of difficulty with reading.

Both of them struggled to focus at school and found being told what to do difficult and overwhelming. Reading with them at home one-on-one was a chance to give them the joy of reading in a familiar, calm environment, where they could focus on enjoying the story rather than on their ability to perform academically and follow instructions. They were able to read for pleasure at home with our mother in a way they couldn't in a busy classroom, where there was lots of sensory input.

It's important to remember the way autism presents itself can vary a lot from child to child. We need to be sensitive to each child's particular strengths and limitations. For example, some children may understand the emotional narrative of a story less than others. It's always good to check in with questions like: 'How do you think this character feels?' to encourage them to consider emotions as well as plot. You can always offer your own insights. And you can help them work it out by picking books with lots of pictures to look at for clues, and by looking at the facial expressions of the characters.

Children on the autism spectrum can be very creative and are good mimics, so it can be fun to read books with repetitive phrases you can say in silly voices together. Many also have a 'special interest', like trains or dinosaurs. Reading exclusively within this topic, including non-fiction, is a great way to hold their interest.

It's important to remember that for many children, autism is simply a different way of looking at the world: it can be a gift! Reading with children on the autism spectrum isn't about trying to get them to see the book in the way we do, it's about helping them develop their own understanding and enjoyment of the book in whatever way they access it. My brother and sister often added another layer of insight to stories that I wouldn't have had on my own. We often re-read stories because they enjoyed the familiarity.

Reading can be key in developing social and empathy skills in children on the autism spectrum no matter where they are on the spectrum. Even just spending time with an adult outside their family can be extremely beneficial. So don't worry about what you read or whether you finish it, focus on developing that bond and helping to foster their individuality.

What to look for when choosing books

The 3Rs: Rhyme, Rhythm, Repetition. Children on the autism spectrum might prefer stories that are highly structured, with a cyclical plot and predictable language.

Look for sensory elements. Does the book encourage movement or singing? Call and response? Is there anything interesting about the book itself as an object to hold, use, and touch? Are there lights, buttons or sounds? If not, is there a way for you and your volunteer partner to add a sensory element?

Ensure pictures aren't too abstract and communicate the story clearly. Books with photos and drawings of babies and people's faces can help with emotional learning.

Look for books about the child's individual specific interests if you know what they are.

Try to find books that are funny or exciting – books that are easy to engage with.

Black print on coloured paper (not bright yellow) can help with visual processing problems, as the reduced contrast can make it easier to read. Experiment with different colours.

Further reading

Communication tips from the Autism Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/tips>

What is Autism from the NHS

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/what-is-autism/>