



**Ambitious  
about Autism**



**Autism  
Education  
Trust**

**Toolkit for post-16  
professionals**

# Transition to employment

A toolkit to support autistic young people  
into their first experiences of employment,  
further education or training



Supported by:



**Department  
for Education**



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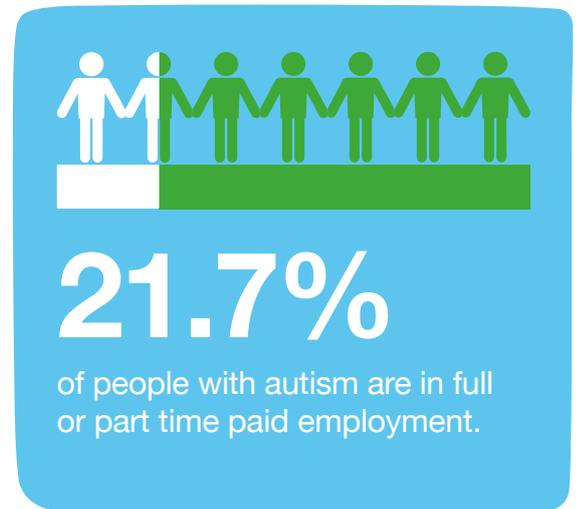
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# Introduction

**When they finish school, few autistic young people move on to college, further training or the workplace. Only 21.7% of autistic individuals are in full or part-time employment (Office for National Statistics, 2020). We want to change this. We want to enable more autistic young people to reach their potential by equipping those who support them with the skills and knowledge to understand their needs. Just 19% of young people with autism say they have had good careers advice and a quarter of young people with autism have had no access to work experience (Ambitious about Autism, 2016).**



These resources provide the tools to help autistic young people prepare for work experience, employment or further training.

Ensuring that autistic young people can reach their potential in further education, training or employment is a collaborative effort. These resources aim to help young people entering the workplace, to reduce the anxiety associated with a new role and enable all candidates to demonstrate their experience with confidence.

## About us

**Ambitious about Autism** is the national charity for children and young people with autism. We run Employ Autism, a national programme that helps autistic individuals join the workforce by breaking down barriers and increasing the confidence of employers to recruit people with autism and neurodiversity. The programme provides training, resources and ongoing mentorship to a wide range of partners across the UK, including employers, careers professionals, parents and young people.

The **Autism Education Trust (AET)** is a not for-profit programme led by two national autism charities: the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism. Established and supported by the Department for Education, the AET promotes and supports partnerships throughout the education system to improve educational access, experience and outcomes for children and young people with autism. Underpinned by current research into good education practice, the AET programme is structured around the three education phases: early years, school and post-16. The programme's core values are person-centred, outcomes and process-focused, inclusive and accessible, evidence-based, high quality and working in partnership.



About autism

# Information about autism



## What is autism?

**Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects one person in 100 in the UK. It affects the way a person communicates and how they experience the world around them.**



Autism is considered a spectrum condition because while autistic people share some similar characteristics, they are also all different from each other. The autism spectrum is not linear, from high to low, but varies in every way that one person might vary from another.

Many autistic people also have co-occurring conditions which can make their needs more complex. These could include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, physical health conditions and communication difficulties.

Officially autism is considered a disability, but some people do not identify in this way. Autism may be viewed as a disability or disabling because of the impact of autism and co-occurring conditions on daily life.

Autistic people have many strengths that balance the challenges and difficulties they may face. Some of these strengths may include, for example, exceptional attention to detail, an increased interest in topics that bring them joy and the ability to offer different perspectives to questions.

Sadly, owing to lack of understanding and support, many autistic young people face exclusion from school and struggle to access social activities with their peers. They also miss opportunities to advance to further education or find meaningful employment.

Supporting autistic young people to access inclusive work experience can transform their employment prospects, giving them the opportunity to experience a working environment, learn new skills and develop independence.

## Terms to describe an autistic individual

“autistic person”

“person with autism”

“I have Asperger’s”

“on the spectrum”

“autism spectrum disorder”

“autism spectrum condition”

“verbal”

“non-verbal”

“speaks few or no words”

## How do we talk about autism?

**Autistic people describe themselves and autism in different ways, so it is always best to ask the individual about their preference. When you meet an autistic person, they may use different terms to describe themselves.**

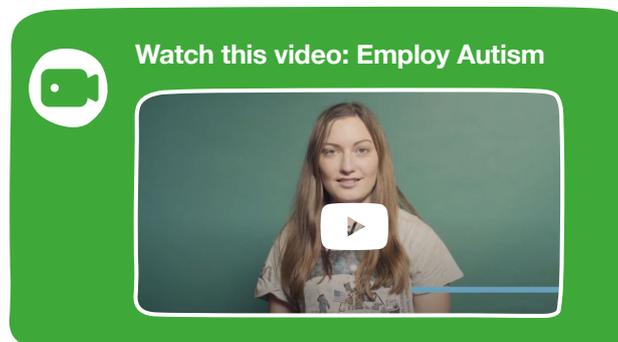
There are also different labels used when talking about an autism diagnosis; some are no longer used, and some are new. Some autistic people may have been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, autism spectrum condition or disorder, pathological demand avoidance ([see glossary of terms](#)), atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder or high-functioning autism. These are all autism but have different labels and have been used to mean slightly different profiles of autism.

### Talking positively about autism

- When talking about autism, don’t use terms such as ‘suffer’ or ‘disease’. Autism is not a mental health condition or a disease: it is a different way of experiencing and processing the world around you. You could instead describe adjustments that can reduce challenges and lessen anxiety, and focus on the strengths they have.
- When discussing autism, encourage use of the term ‘neurodiversity’ ([see glossary of terms](#)), which encompasses ‘neurotypical’ and ‘neurodivergent’ individuals. An autistic young person could identify as neurodivergent. The purpose of this toolkit is to help employers create more inclusive workplaces where neurodivergent individuals can thrive, through reviewing and adjusting hiring processes, management practices and workspaces that have been designed only with having a neurotypical people in mind. The benefit of neurodiverse workforce can include different ways of thinking. Neurodivergent individuals can make a significant contribution, including creativity, high ability and consistency in tasks.



- Try not to use 'high-functioning' or 'low-functioning'. Instead, you could describe a person's support needs. Some autistic people may need higher levels of support in a situation that they find difficult, while others may have low support needs, because they can deploy strategies to manage a situation by themselves or with less outside support.
- Try not to assume what someone may be like because they are autistic. Instead, ask them or someone who knows them well about their strengths and difficulties, likes and dislikes. It is better not to make a presumption about a person or their abilities before you meet them, as this may influence how we treat them.



## What are meltdowns and shutdowns?

**Meltdowns are often the result of situations that are highly stimulating or create high levels of anxiety, situations from which it feels as though there is no escape.**

When in extreme distress like this, the flight, fight or freeze response is a natural reaction. If the person cannot escape, that leaves two options: fight or freeze. Meltdowns are similar to the fight response and shutdowns are similar to the freeze response.

The resources in this toolkit help autistic young people to communicate effectively and share their individual needs, with a view to reducing the chance of being in scenarios and situations that can cause them anxiety, thereby avoiding the occurrence of meltdowns and shutdowns. The workplace adjustments identified in the toolkit templates and implemented by an employer should help reduce anxiety. It is important, however, for an employer and a post-16 professional to understand why meltdowns and shutdowns occur and how to support the young person if they do.



### Meltdowns

When an autistic individual is having a meltdown, they often have increased levels of anxiety and distress, which may be interpreted as frustration, a 'tantrum' or an aggressive panic attack. It's important to understand that a meltdown is not a tantrum: it is a reaction to a highly distressing or overwhelming situation or environment.

While in a meltdown the person can be injurious to others or themselves because of their extreme state of anxiety. To try and avoid a meltdown, put in place pre-emptive planning to mitigate triggers. This could include, for example, reducing anxiety related to uncertainty by providing information and agendas before meetings and sticking to them, and reducing unexpected changes to tasks and routines. Another way to reduce the likelihood of a meltdown is to create enabling environments that don't overwhelm the senses. There are some top tips later in this toolkit to help achieve this.



### Shutdowns

Shutdowns are often the result of situations with high demand in one or more of the following areas: social situations, situations that require a lot of thinking, lack of sleep, very emotional situations and those that are very active or physical.

To use an analogy, a shutdown is like a computer trying to turn on, but it can't because there isn't enough power to do so. During a shutdown, an autistic individual may not seem themselves because they're so overwhelmed that their focus has shifted to the basic functions. With a reduced ability to process what is going on, they may struggle to communicate as they normally do, which can mean that they are mute or have great difficulty forming coherent sentences.

The best remedy during a shutdown is giving the person the space to rest, recuperate and recover without placing additional demands on them. A shutdown can be like a reset for an autistic person.



Watch these videos where young autistic people describe shutdowns and meltdowns:

Shutdowns



Meltdowns



“Some autistic people feel as though they need to camouflage themselves to fit in.”



## Masking and camouflaging

Some autistic people can appear at ease in social situations, so much so that it may be difficult to ‘see’ that they are autistic. While most people tend to perform socially in a given situation to appear their ‘best self’, an autistic individual may mask some behaviours deemed visibly autistic.

This means that an autistic person can appear to be fine and coping or excelling in a social situation, but the repercussions and effects of performing often become evident afterwards. In the school context, young people often mask during the day, but once they get home, they may have a meltdown or be fatigued.

To support an autistic person, you can encourage them to be themselves as much as is comfortable for them. They may not realise that they are masking or camouflaging or understand the detrimental effects. By creating a welcoming environment where self-stimulatory behaviour (‘stimming’), different communication styles and sensory needs are accepted, you can reduce someone’s ‘need’ to mask. Through reducing the perceived consequences of being visibly autistic and allowing for difference, an autistic person may be encouraged not to mask or to mask less often, which is beneficial for all involved.



Watch video of our Youth Patron Bella reading a poem she wrote about her experiences in education.



Professionals'  
toolkit

# Toolkit for post-16 professionals



# Toolkit for post-16 professionals

**This toolkit is for professionals working in a post-16 environment, to help them engage successfully with their autistic clients.**

Having access to high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance discussions with professionals who understand their needs and can support them is crucial to autistic young people's success as they consider the next stage of their academic or employment journey. In this section, you will find resources to facilitate successful discussions with autistic young people and help them prepare for, and reflect on, their work experience placements.



## Things to think about before your session

### Information processing

Help the autistic young person to gain the most from your discussions by sharing information in advance about what to expect from you and the session.

Send photos of yourself and the room you will meet in, to provide predictability and familiarity.

Consider completing these templates over more than one appointment or session to avoid overwhelming the young person. Can you produce a flow chart of what happens next? Many autistic young people prefer visual information.



### The environment

Think about the room you will meet in. For example, can you control the light or the temperature? Is the room full of clutter? Are you likely to be disturbed or interrupted by external noise? These have potential to impact on your interaction.

You can ask the young person the following questions if it will help them to feel comfortable and engage in the meeting:

- Would you prefer the lights turned on or off?
- Do you need to wear sunglasses, ear defenders or use a stim toy (see glossary of terms)?
- Would you prefer the meeting room door to be open or closed (subject to safety and security)?

Ideally, avoid booking meetings with an autistic young person to coincide with scheduled fire alarm testing. If this cannot be avoided, warn the young person (preferably before the meeting), so that the noise is not unexpected. Try to minimise any distractions from:

- phones
- people walking past
- people interrupting your meeting.





## The resources

You can use all the templates in this section or select just those most suited to the needs of each young person. It is good practice to share relevant information in advance, giving the young person time to prepare. A few extra minutes of preparation will help you have a more productive, rewarding and ultimately enjoyable discussion.

### Invitation to appointment



Use this template to invite the young person to your session and help them prepare.



### Employee profile



Once the young person has been matched with a work experience placement, use this template to create a profile of the young person that can be shared with the employer (with the young person's permission). This will help the employer to understand and support the young person.



### Pre-placement discussion summary



Use this template to identify the young person's skills and experience. You should also send this template to the young person to read ahead of their session.



### Work placement evaluation



This template can be used during the work placement and as a reflective tool once the work placement has finished, to understand what went well and what could have been improved. Also use this to consider the young person's future aspirations and career goals, and to plan actions.





# Invitation to appointment

Use this template to invite the young person to your session and help them to prepare. Ensure you amend and personalise the template for each young person. Send blank templates of the pre-placement discussion summary and employee profile to enable the young person to prepare.



## Appointment details

**Young person's name:**

**Date of appointment:**

You may wish to avoid booking an appointment when fire alarm testing is scheduled.

**Time of appointment:** 12-hour clock

24-hour clock

**You will meet:**

**Building where the meeting will be:**

If adding photos of where you will meet, ensure that this venue doesn't change.

**Room where the meeting will be:**

If adding photos of where you will meet, ensure that the allocated room doesn't change.

**How to get to the meeting – useful Information**

Also include information about accessing the building and the room, eg access codes, signing-in process, location of the lift and stairs, nearest bus stop, taxi rank, car drop-off point, car parking locations and costs.





## Invitation to appointment (continued 2/2)



### **What we will talk about in the meeting:**

You may find it useful to prepare for our session by reviewing the attached documents and completing this or discussing the questions with someone who knows you well.

### **Please let me know if I can do anything to help you participate in the session.**

For example, tell me if you have a preferred way of communicating or sensory requirements.

### **If you need any help on the day of the meeting, please call:**

Include the name and contact details of a friendly individual (you, the receptionist or a colleague) who will be available to speak to the young person before the meeting, eg if they have difficulties getting to the building, etc, so that the young person does not feel alone or overwhelmed.



## Pre-placement discussion summary

Use this template to identify the young person's skills and experience. You should also send this template to the young person to read before for the session.



They may find it useful to prepare for the session by completing the form in advance, perhaps discussing the questions with someone who knows them well or getting help to complete the form.

If they have one, the young person should provide their existing CV (curriculum vitae) to support the completion of their skills and qualification sections of the plan.

**1** Name of young person:

**2** Date:

**3** **Introductions**  
Post-16 professional to explain their role (including data protection, safeguarding and confidentiality as appropriate).

**4** **What is your current situation?**  
(Include all that apply)

**Studying**

**Working**

**Volunteering**

**Unemployed**

**5** **Education**

**Which subjects have you studied and what grades did you achieve?**



## Pre-placement discussion summary (continued 2/7)



**Which subjects did you enjoy the most?**

**What did you enjoy most about your studies?**





## Pre-placement discussion summary (continued 3/7)



### 6 Future employment

**What kind of work would you like to do?**

**Do you want to achieve a qualification while at work?**

**Do you have preference for working hours and days?**

### 7 Previous employment

**Have you had any work experiences (including voluntary work)?**

**What was your role?**

**What responsibilities did you have?**

**What skills and knowledge do you have or did you learn?**





## Pre-placement discussion summary (continued 4/7)



### 8 Training

**Have you undertaken any training for a job?**

**What did you do?**

**Did you enjoy it?**

### 9 What are your interests?

**Creative, technical, problem-solving**

**TV programmes, films or computer games**

**Researching a particular area or topic**

**Animals or nature**

**Other**





## Pre-placement discussion summary (continued 5/7)



### 10 Past experience

**Have you looked for work before?**

**Where did you research jobs to apply for?**

**Did you face any barriers or challenges when applying for jobs and attending interviews?**

**Have you had feedback on unsuccessful applications?  
If yes, what was the feedback?**

**What do you think you are good at?**

**What do other people say you are good at?**

**Have you experienced any barriers or challenges in the workplace?  
If yes, how could they be avoided in a future workplace?**



# Pre-placement discussion summary (continued 6/7)



## 11 Future work placement

What kind of work placement are you interested in?

What would you like to learn from a work placement?

What would you like to happen once the placement is completed?

## 12 Any further questions?

How confident do you feel about a future work placement? (Please select one option)

	<input type="text" value="0"/>	<input type="text" value="1"/>	<input type="text" value="2"/>	<input type="text" value="3"/>	<input type="text" value="4"/>	<input type="text" value="5"/>	<input type="text" value="6"/>	<input type="text" value="7"/>	<input type="text" value="8"/>	<input type="text" value="9"/>	<input type="text" value="10"/>	
not very confident												very confident

Any concerns or worries?



# Pre-placement discussion summary (continued 7/7)



## 13 Suggest actions



Discussions about your future are important. Watch this message from Sam:





## Employee profile

Work with the young person to create a profile of their strengths and needs that can be shared with the employer, using this template as the basis and supplementing it with information you have gathered through their pre-placement discussion summary. Share the completed profile with the young person and check that they are happy for you to send it to the employer. The final part of the document is for the employer to fill out to agree adjustments being made for the young person.



Tell the young person that their employee profile is a confidential document and that only the relevant people in the placement organisation, who they agree to in advance, will have access, for example, their line manager and HR. Other colleagues can be informed if the young person feels this is required, when appropriate.

This template is an editable document.

## Employee profile

**My name is:**



### Section 1.1: About me



#### My skills

(Tick all that apply)

##### Attention to detail

(eg being thorough, accurate, detecting errors)

##### Artistic skills

(eg drawing, visual arts)

##### Music and

##### sound skills

(eg ability to think and understand in patterns, creative thinking)

##### Listening skills

(eg ability to absorb and retain facts)

##### A strong sense of morality

(eg honesty, lack of judgmental attitude)

##### Maintain focus when

##### engaged in repetitive work

(eg not getting distracted or bored)

##### Conscientious and diligent

(eg organised, punctual)

##### Mathematical abilities

(eg processing numbers, calculations)

##### Social skills

(eg face-to face interaction with others)

##### Online communication

skills (eg email and text interaction with others)

##### Creative talents

(eg identifying improvements)

##### Analysing information

(eg detecting patterns in data)

##### Technical abilities

(eg computer skills, engineering)

##### Trustworthiness

(eg doing what you say you will do)

##### Loyalty

(eg staying with a friend, or course or organisation)

##### Emotional intelligence

(eg self-awareness, empathy)

##### Kindness

(eg helping others)

##### Good memory

(eg recalling facts)





## Employee profile (continued 2/8)



**Anything else not covered above:**



### **My strengths and other things I am good at**

Use information gathered in the pre-placement discussion summary or any other additional information, such as the young person's EHC plan if you have access to this.





## Employee profile (continued 3/8)



### Section 1.2: How to prepare me in the best way for my work experience.

(Tick all that apply)

I would benefit from receiving a plan, schedule of work or list of tasks I am expected to do each day or week.

I would benefit from visiting my work experience placement before starting.

I would benefit from meeting my manager before starting my placement.

I would benefit from seeing where I am going to sit and where I can have my lunch.

I would benefit from knowing the address of my work experience placement so that I can practise undertaking my journey.

I would benefit from understanding the job role, the tasks I am expected to undertake and the hours I will be working, including breaks.

I would benefit from discussing flexible work hours, so that I can avoid travelling during rush hour.

I would benefit from knowing whether there is a dress code or what standard of dress is expected.

**Any other information:**





## Employee profile (continued 4/8)



### Section 1.3: The best ways of communicating with me in the workplace

(Tick all that apply)

I would prefer to be introduced to new people one at a time.

I prefer to communicate verbally.

I prefer to communicate via email and written communication.

I enjoy talking with people.

I prefer them to start the conversation.

I would prefer it if people didn't talk to me about non-work-related topics (eg at lunchtime).

I prefer to avoid eye contact.

I prefer to talk to only one person at a time.

Say my name to get my attention.

I do not like answering the phone.

**Any other information:**

I do not like making phone calls.

I may have times when I am focusing and cannot be disturbed (and I will use the four-step traffic light system).

I appreciate frequent feedback.

I like to ask lots of questions until I am familiar with a task.

I benefit from regular scheduled meetings with my manager (eg weekly).

I would prefer not to attend face-to-face meetings.

I would prefer not to attend online meetings.





## Employee profile (continued 5/8)



### Section 1.4: The best ways to give me instructions and tasks

(Tick all that apply)

I need instructions backed up in writing.

I prefer visual information, for example, flow charts and diagrams.

I need to record instructions, so that I have time to process the information and to support my memory.

I need one question or instruction at a time.

I need instructions given to me in prearranged meetings rather than when I am concentrating on something else.

I need time to process what you have said.

I need to do something else while listening, for example, use a fidget toy.

I need information or questions in advance before discussing them.

I prefer to concentrate on one task at a time.

I am more comfortable completing the same task repeatedly.

I prefer to have a bit of variety in the tasks I am undertaking.

I need advance notice of changes and help to manage these changes (including time to get used to them).

I need help to structure my daily tasks, including breaks.

I may need some extra time to complete tasks or flexibility in relation to deadlines.

**Any other information:**





# Employee profile (continued 6/8)



## Section 1.5: What you might see me do and what this means

(Tick all that apply, and/or include other behaviours relevant to you and provide some further information)



### When I am happy, I:

- talk a lot
- jump up and down
- move about or dance
- hum or sing.
- 
- 



### If I become overwhelmed, have a meltdown or shutdown, I need:

- to be left alone
- to be allowed to leave
- to be checked on by someone
- to be allowed to sit somewhere quiet
- my parents or carers to be contacted.
- 
- 



### When I am unsettled, I:

- start scratching or picking
- stop talking
- leave the room
- look angry
- become upset or sad.
- 
- 

### Any other information:





## Employee profile (continued 7/8)



### Section 1.6: My preferred environment

(Tick all that apply and provide some further information)

I can be distracted by background conversation, office talk, the sound of air conditioning, fans etc.

I can find office lighting too bright.

I can find the temperature too warm.

I can find the temperature too cold.

I can be distracted by smells such as strong perfume or aftershave, cleaning products or office kitchens.

I can be distracted very easily, for example, by people walking past me or doors banging.

I benefit from taking frequent breaks.

I benefit from having access to a quiet space.

I use ear defenders, ear plugs or noise-cancelling headphones.

I wear tinted glasses or sunglasses in the office.

I prefer to work remotely if possible.

**Any other information:**





# Employee profile (continued 8/8)



## Section 2: Agreed workplace adjustments

**This section is for the employer to agree workplace adjustments.**

It may be useful to follow STEPS in order to agree adjustments with the young person.

STEPS were based upon and adapted from the work of the [Centre for Applied Autism Research](#), and Natalie Jenkins and Sue Fletcher-Watson.

**Agreed workplace adjustments:**

(For example, flexible work hours to avoid commuting during rush hour, allocated desk (in an otherwise hot-desking environment), designated quiet space, noise-cancelling headphones)

**Agreed by:**

**Employer:**

**Young person:**

**Date:**

**Date for review:**

(review every two months)





## Work placement evaluation

This template can be used during the work placement and as a reflective tool once the work placement has finished to identify from the young person's perspective what went well and what could have been improved. You will also consider the young person's future aspirations and career goals, and plan actions with set time frames.



Send a blank template of the work placement evaluation to the young person before their work placement starts so they can include aspects throughout their placement. Some individuals will probably find it better to complete the form in person with you during the post-placement meeting, drawing on your direction and insight, and knowing the questions in advance is likely to be helpful.

**Name of young person:**

**Date:**

### **Role and responsibilities**

(For example, what tasks did you complete throughout your placement? These can include daily tasks, one-off tasks, project work, etc.)

### **What you enjoyed during your placement**

(Think about your role, the tasks you completed, the people you worked with, the environment and nature of the company.)

### **What you did not enjoy during your placement**

(Think about your role, the tasks you completed, the people you worked with, the environment and nature of the company.)





## Work placement evaluation (continued 2/4)



**To what extent were you able to put your existing skills and knowledge to practical use?**  
(For example, to what extent were the skills identified in your employee profile used during your work placement?)

**What skills did you learn?**

(For example, computer and IT skills, time management, organisation, social skills, etc. Did you learn more than you expected?)

**Do you feel that the skills you learned were challenging enough?**

(For example, did you find these new skills interesting, and did you feel a sense of accomplishment?)

**Professional development completed during the placement**

(For example, include any in-house training or courses you completed during your work placement.)





## Work placement evaluation (continued 3/4)



### **What do you think could have been improved or changed during your placement?**

(For example, think about the support you received during your placement. Did they understand your needs sufficiently? Was the learning adapted so that it met your needs? Did you get enough support from your manager? Was the pre-placement support good enough?)

### **Did the placement help confirm that you wanted to work in that environment or do something else?**

(For example, did you enjoy your work placement? Did you not enjoy aspects of your work placement?)

### **What kind of job do you want to do after you have finished your placement?**

(For example, do you want to stay in the same field of work? Do you want to do something different? Do you feel confident about these plans?)





# Work placement evaluation (continued 4/4)



## Actions:

Using the information gathered above, discuss with the young person and collaboratively decide on agreed actions and outline when they will be completed.

Action 1 **1**

Date to be completed by:

Action 1 **3**

Date to be completed by:

Action 1 **2**

Date to be completed by:

Action 1 **4**

Date to be completed by:



Resources

# Resources





## Resources

- **Ambitious about Autism Training and Consultancy services**
- **Youth Group for autistic young people**
- **Autism Education Trust (AET) – learning and development programme and resources**
- **Creased Puddle**
- **DARE Adjustments Toolkit**
- **Centre for Applied Autism Research**
- **STEPS: Sensory, Timely, Explicit, Predictable, Social. 10 STEPS to creating a neurodiverse inclusive environment**
- **EmployAbility – assisting disabled young persons and graduates into employment**
- **Know Your Normal – understanding your baseline mental health and wellbeing**
- **RNID – using technology to communicate**
- **AS Mentoring – specialist mentoring and employment support for neurodiverse adults**
- **Autism Forward – specialised mentoring funding to support adults with autism with employability and accessing employment**
- **Dr Mitzi Waltz – Autism consultant, expert witness, trainer, author and researcher**
- **Evenbreak – helping talented disabled candidates and inclusive employers to find each other**
- **Employ Autism – Autism specialist careers advice and work experience, supported recruitment**
- **NAS Autism Services Directory – a nationwide directory of services**
- **Autism Alliance – umbrella organisation for autism groups**
- **Neurodiversity at work – a guide published by CIPD**
- **Neurodiversity at work – a research paper published by ACAS**

Ambitious about Autism provides a range of free resources for anybody to access when supporting autistic children and young people. Below is a list of links to resources available to you.



Free webinars  
for professionals



Free toolkits  
co-produced with  
autistic youth patrons



A series of videos explaining autism  
by autistic youth patrons:

What is autism



Shutdowns



Meltdowns



Communication



## Glossary of terms

### A

#### **anxiety disorder**

Anxiety is a condition which means you worry more than normal about things. Anxiety can be mild or very difficult to live with and can change depending on the situation and support available. There are many causes for anxiety and different ways it can present, and it doesn't always make sense to the non-anxious person. Anxiety is a condition that someone can have alongside autism.

#### **asperger syndrome**

Previous versions of the 'International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) diagnostic manuals categorised Asperger syndrome as a separate classification and an individual could have received a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. In both ICD-11 and DSM-5 the classification of autism has been changed to include Asperger syndrome. Diagnosticians (people who diagnose 'autism') will be moving away from the separate diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, and the diagnosis a person will receive if they have the characteristics of autism will be defined as autism spectrum disorder.

#### **attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)**

A condition that someone can have alongside autism. People who have ADHD may be more hyperactive or struggle with attention than people who don't have ADHD. There are three presentations of ADHD: predominantly inattentive presentation, predominantly hyperactive or impulsive presentation, and combined presentation.

#### **auditory processing disorder (APD)**

This is a condition where the person has difficulty processing sound as you would expect. They may understand speech more slowly, struggle to distinguish similar spoken words, be unable to concentrate when there is a lot of noise and may hear music differently. This is a condition that someone can have alongside autism.

#### **autism**

Autistic people process the world around them differently from non-autistic people. Someone who is autistic or has a diagnosis of autism is different in four areas: social interaction, social communication, routines and repetition (social imagination) and sensory differences.

It is important to acknowledge there have been different diagnostic names and terms used, including autism, autism spectrum disorder,

autism spectrum condition, atypical autism, high-functioning autism, pervasive developmental disorders and Asperger syndrome. There are two diagnostic manuals which provide the standardisation criteria for the classification of disorders and can be used in diagnosing 'autism'; the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (which will come into effect on 1 January 2022) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). The diagnostic manuals do vary; for example, the ICD-11's classification provides detailed guidelines for distinguishing between autism with and without a learning disability.

It is important to note that although the titles of the two diagnostic classification systems DSM and ICD refer to 'mental disorders' and 'diseases', 'autism' is neither a disease nor a mental health condition. Within both manuals 'autism' is categorised as a 'neurodevelopmental disorder'.

### B

#### **burnout**

When an autistic person over stretches themselves by doing too many tasks, too much socialising or making their brain work too hard they can experience burnout. Burnout is similar to when you are ill, tired and need a rest but are unable to do so.

The autistic person might not act like themselves because they aren't able to think as clearly as they did before a burnout started.

### C

#### **communication difficulties**

Communication difficulties can impact how an individual is able to communicate expressively. This could mean having little or no speech or speech that can be difficult to understand or finding it difficult to say words, generate sentences or express feelings, wants and needs. Communication difficulties may affect an individual's receptive communication, understanding what other people are saying, responding to others' language, and following tasks and instructions. Communication difficulties can be a co-occurring condition for some individuals with autism.



## Glossary of terms (continued)

### co-occurring conditions

Individuals with autism may also experience other neurodevelopmental, physical or mental health conditions alongside their autism, which can make their needs more complex. These could include ADHD, depression, anxiety disorder, learning disabilities, physical health conditions and communication difficulties.

### CV (curriculum vitae)

A curriculum vitae, commonly referred to as a CV, is a document used when applying for jobs. It summarises a person's education, work experience, skills and achievements, and interests to promote their abilities to potential employers.

## D

### disclosure

Autistic individuals can choose whether to tell other people that they are autistic and what that means for them. Some people choose not to disclose, and others choose whether to disclose depending on the situation they are in.

### dyslexia

This condition affects the development of literacy and language-related skills. Dyslexic individuals may find it difficult to process and remember information they see and hear and experience difficulties with reading, writing and spelling. Dyslexia can also impact on other areas, such as organisational skills. It can be a co-occurring condition alongside autism.

### dyspraxia or developmental coordination disorder (DCD)

A neurological condition that affects movement, fine or gross motor coordination skills, which can cause clumsiness, and poor hand-eye coordination, which affects writing or using small objects. It can be a co-occurring condition alongside autism.

## E

### education, health and care (EHC) plan

A legal document issued by a local authority describing a child or young person's education, health and social care needs and the support that will be given to them.

A young person can request an assessment themselves if they're aged 16 to 25.

## H

### human resources (HR)

A department of people in an organisation responsible for managing all matters related to employees, including the recruitment and selection process for job opportunities. When applying for a role, the HR department may be the main point of contact for an individual to find out further information about the role and explore adjustments during the recruitment process. They may be the first point of contact after successful appointment and in the workplace.

## L

### learning difficulty

Unlike a learning disability, a learning difficulty does not affect intellect. Examples of learning difficulties are dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyslexia, dyspraxia and language and social communication disorders.

### learning disabilities

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability, which may result in difficulty with everyday activities or taking longer to develop new skills. Learning disabilities are lifelong and can be mild, moderate or severe. With the right support, people with learning disabilities can lead independent lives. People can be autistic or have a learning disability, or both.

## M

### masking

Masking or camouflaging is when an autistic individual acts to appear less autistic or not autistic at all. They may change how they look, how they talk and their behaviours. Too much masking can lead to a burnout.

### meltdown

A meltdown is a response to an overwhelming situation. The response can be very loud and sometimes physical. The person needs time to recover and should not be laughed at for having a meltdown.



## Glossary of terms (continued)

### mental health conditions

These are conditions for which an individual with autism may also receive a diagnosis and are therefore defined as co-occurring conditions. Mental health conditions can include depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and more. An autistic individual will need to receive appropriate support and interventions, such as talking treatments or psychiatric medication to reduce the impact of the condition (or conditions).

## N

### neurodivergent

This is the term used to describe someone who has a neurodiverse condition, for example, autism. This means their brain functions, learns and processes information differently. Due to this diversity, neurodivergent thinkers offer a different approach and contribute a great deal to any team or workforce.

### neurodiversity

This refers to the diversity of the human brain. The way we think is not always the same; everyone has different experiences based on how their brain works.

The term 'neurodiversity' describes the range of different diagnoses that may lead people to perceive and experience the world in different ways, including autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and dyslexia. Neurodiversity encompasses individuals who are 'neurodivergent'; a neurodivergent individual will have one or more neurodiverse conditions.

### neurotypical

This is the term used to describe people who are not autistic, that is, whose neurodevelopment has been typical and whose brain functioning is considered 'normal' according to societal norms.

## P

### post-16 professional

A qualified professional who supports young people to think about their future career, as well as learning and training opportunities to fulfil employment opportunities. A young person would meet them during a pre-placement discussion meeting. 'Post-16 professional' is an umbrella term we have used for this toolkit. A relevant professional is likely to have one of the following job titles: Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Officer, Employment Coach, Job Coach, Employability Coach, Careers Adviser, Employment Specialist or Employability Specialist. It is best practice for a post-16 professional to be registered with a professional body and have a qualification at Level 4 or above.

### pathological demand avoidance (PDA)

Individuals with PDA experience an extreme resistance to and avoidance of everyday demands. PDA is described as all-encompassing for an individual. At present PDA is not identified as a separate diagnosis or a subtype in the autism spectrum disorder diagnosis in diagnostic manuals used in the UK or internationally. Therefore, there is no consensus regarding PDA, and the academic and clinical debates continue about the condition and how best to support individuals with PDA.

### physical health conditions

These are conditions for which an autistic person may also receive a diagnosis, and are therefore defined as co-occurring conditions. Physical health conditions can include diabetes, asthma or irritable bowel syndrome, to name a few. An individual will need to be supported by medical professionals who are experts in these conditions and receive appropriate support and interventions, possibly including medication, to reduce the impact of the condition (or conditions).

### pre-placement discussion

A meeting with a young person to explore information, advice and guidance on education, training and work opportunities, to develop their employability skills, preparing them for their future career. The session would be conducted by a post-16 professional, to help a young person make informed choices about their future.

A session would normally take place at a time of transition for a young person, for example, a move from school into further education, employment or an apprenticeship.



## Glossary of terms (continued)

### pre-placement discussion summary

A form to guide the discussions between a young person and a post-16 professional during a pre-placement discussion. The form includes questions to ask a young person about their education, training and past experiences, future employment aspirations and their interests, and to explore future work placement opportunities.

## R

### repetitive behaviour

An intense preoccupation with one subject or activity; distress about change; insistence on routines or rituals with no purpose; or repetitive movements, such as hand-flapping.

### routine

Some autistic people have very strict routines that they like to stick to. Having a predictable routine helps them to manage anxiety.

## S

### self-stimulatory (stimming) behaviour

Stimming is short for 'self-stimulatory behaviour'. Stimming can involve a repetitive movement, repeating words, hand movements and making noises. Some stims are barely noticeable and some are very visible. Stimming behaviours are a way of self-regulating and shouldn't be stopped or reduced as they are an autistic person's way of managing a situation. Some individuals may use a 'stim toy' (see definition).

### sensory processing and sensitivity

Sensory processing is how we take in and perceive sensory information. This may include hyper (high) or hypo (low) sensitivity to the five senses (taste, touch, sight, smell and sounds), as well as balance and body awareness.

### shutdown

Shutdowns are similar to meltdowns but are not as visible or loud. A person may withdraw instead of being their usual self.

### social communication

This is the way individuals communicate, understand and use language with others. Autistic people may show differences in understanding and expressing communication and language.

### social interaction

This is how individuals interact with other people, develop relationships and socialise with other people. Autistic people may differ in their ability to understand social behaviour and the feelings of others, which informs the development of friendships and relationships.

### special interest

This is an intense and passionate level of focus on things of interest on a specific subject. For some people, this can be a game or TV show, a type of animal, a type of machine or a country. Special interests are varied and can bring the person joy.

### STEPS (sensory, timely, explicit, predictable, social)

A checklist tool developed by the Centre for Applied Autism Research at the University of Bath to create a neurodiverse inclusive environment, for neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals; an autistic individual could identify as neurodivergent. The tool provides a structure to aid discussion and evaluation of a current environment, with examples of adaptations to consider, ensuring environments are fully inclusive.

### stim toy

An object used for stimming or fiddling with when a person is feeling anxious. Stim toys come in a range of different types and can include fidget spinners, play dough, tangles, pens, soft toys and balls. Each person's preference is unique and personal; using their preferred stim toy can help them to feel comfortable and engage in the situation they are in.

## W

### workplace adjustments

Employers are required under the governance of law to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that workers (including trainees and interns) with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs. Reasonable adjustments can include changing the recruitment process, physical changes to the workplace and adaptations to equipment.

The [Equality Act 2010](#) defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on an individual's ability to do normal daily activities. To align with the Equality Act a diagnosis of autism would be classified as a disability, to ensure an individual receives reasonable adjustments in the workplace.



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## Department for Education

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For further information about the work of the Ambitious Youth Network, or if you would like to become involved, [visit our website](#) or email [participation@ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk](mailto:participation@ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)



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Thank you to Creased Puddle for its support and expertise with the development of the toolkit. Creased Puddle works closely with organisations to formulate communication strategies, provide training tools, carry out workplace assessments and put people with autism in the right jobs.

[creasedpuddle.co.uk](http://creasedpuddle.co.uk)



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[bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-applied-autism-research](http://bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-applied-autism-research)



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[dareuk.org](http://dareuk.org)

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# We are Ambitious about Autism

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity for children and young people with autism.

We provide services, raise awareness and understanding, and campaign for social and policy change. Through TreeHouse School, The Rise School and Ambitious College, we offer specialist education and support.

Our ambition is to make the ordinary possible for more children and young people with autism.

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