

# Understanding autism

Autism is unique for each person. Autistic ākonga may need support to make sense of and effectively participate in the world.

## Defining autism

Takiwātanga is the Māori word for autism. It means 'in my/their/his/her own time and space'.

Autism is characterised by different ways that people perceive the world, think and behave, and how they communicate and interact with others.

Previous terms to describe autism include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Asperger's Syndrome.

Source: [Altogether Autism](#)



Video hosted on Youtube <http://youtu.be/j3PrAqJ-H9k>

This animation aims to raise understanding and acceptance of autism. Designed to be shared with adults and children, it tackles the complex subject of autism with simple descriptions and positive language.

Closed Captions

Source:

[Sprouts](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3PrAqJ-H9k>

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# Characteristics of autism

Although every autistic learner or tangata whaitakiwātanga is different there are some common characteristics which may include:

- strengths in memorising and learning, especially in technical or logical subjects and reading (decoding)
- a special area of interest
- a preference for order and routine
- finding social interactions challenging, especially responding to non-verbal and social cues
- atypical development in speech, language and communication
- challenges understanding and responding to non-literal communication such as irony, figurative language and nuance
- sensory challenges
- actively seeking and enjoying solitude
- challenges managing and expressing emotions.

Autism is diagnosed on the basis of observed behaviour. There are no blood tests, single defining symptom or physical characteristics that are unique to Autism.

Clinicians use careful observation of behaviours to determine whether a child's challenges are related to Autism.

## Tāngata whaitakiwātanga are unique

Dr Stephen Shore, an autism advocate who is autistic said, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."

Expect diversity when teaching autistic students. Ākonga may:

- need support with all day-to-day tasks.
- need support in specific areas e.g. support at transition times in the school day
- have exceptional gifts and talents that are masked by other learning challenges.

The Ministry of Education website Gifted learners, on TKI has more information on the particular strengths and needs of twice exceptional learners.

### Twice-multi exceptional learners

Sources: [Altogether Autism](#) – Neurological Foundation, [An Educator's Guide to Autism](#) – Organisation for Autism Research

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Video hosted on Youtube <http://youtu.be/IApo5TBR7jc>

The Aspire program asked a group of autistic people five questions about autism.

Closed Captions

**Source:**

[Mass General Giving](#)

<https://youtu.be/IApo5TBR7jc>

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# Influence on learning

Autistic ākonga have a variety of different strengths and learning preferences. They experience their own set of challenges.

Common strengths and preferences	Common challenges
Strong preference for well-planned, structured, predictable, routine-based environments	Coping with change, unfamiliar routines, a lack of structure
Strong preference for quieter, clutter-free, organised spaces	Sensory regulation
Special interest in particular topics and activities	Settling into learning
Processes visual information quickly	Processing and making sense of things, abstract thinking
Strong rote memory, retaining particular facts and details	Expressing information and ideas
Honesty	Verbal communication, social interaction
Special interests	Engaging in learning that does not seem relevant

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