

# A Literally Ausome Autism Explanation

From the perspective of a Primary School Student  
for their peers and classmates

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Making Neurodiversity, Literally

The month of April is known around the world as World Autism acceptance month. It used to be called World Autism 'awareness month', but all that means is that you literally know an Autistic person! Using the word 'acceptance means inclusion & the hope that Autistic people will be better understood & importantly, better supported.

But what is Autism anyway?

I'd like to share with you all a little bit about Autism & what this means to me.

Autism isn't an easy thing to explain, but the best way I like to explain it is like I've got a really busy brain that's hard to turn off.

This doesn't mean my brain is broken, doesn't work properly or has something wrong with it. My brain just works differently.

My brain never slows down, so it means I need to work extra hard to work out which information to let in, what to respond to first or leave for later & what to ignore completely.

This is called 'processing'. Autistic brains process all kinds of information & all at the same time. This is really hard & also really tiring.

The official name for Autism is Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The word 'spectrum' is used to describe Autism as a line where one end of the line is 'less Autistic' & the other end, 'more Autistic'. The line is meant to explain that Autism can affect every Autistic person differently, but if you ask me, one long line to explain our complex brains doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Thankfully this 'line' is being used less & less.

In terms of the actual name for Autism, 'Autism Spectrum Disorder', I also don't like being thought of, or as a disorder, so, I just say I'm Autistic.

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When I say I have a busy brain It means that it can take me longer to answer a question because I need more thinking, or processing time.

It also takes me more time to work out what's going on around me because the way I understand how people communicate is different which affects some things I see & do.

My brain also makes me feel things more intensely. I feel my emotions & also the emotions of people around me really deeply.

My senses are really strong & I need to process this too. This is called sensory processing.

Things can be too loud, too bright, too smelly, too annoying for me... like when I can feel the annoying clothes label, why I hate wearing wet clothes & why I'm the only one I know that hates the taste of vanilla ice cream. It's just so vanilla!

I don't really understand the way people communicate with one another & this can make friendships & socialising harder for me.

For example

\* I'm not good at reading facial expressions. I can read the easy expressions like sad, angry or happy, but really struggle with lots of others.

\* The way words sound during a conversation, or the tone of them is confusing. Last year I got really upset when I thought the CRT was telling me off, but afterwards my friends explained that they were talking louder & slower because what they were saying was really important. It was a new voice & I needed time to get used to it.

\* I find the way people move their body & signal to each other when they're talking confusing. I know the obvious ones, or the ones that people use more often, like shrugging shoulders means 'I don't know', but there are so many others that make zero sense to me.

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Talking. Reasonably. Clearly.

Not understanding these things can make following & understanding conversations hard for me to follow. I also don't know how to join in on a conversation, so I either don't join in or might disrupt the conversation.

I also interrupt a lot as I'm not sure when someone's finished talking. It's not because I think what the person is saying isn't important, but my friends have explained to me that this is how it can make them feel.

Sometimes in class, when the teacher is talking I miss a little bit of what they're saying because I'm playing my matching game. I'm trying to match the sound of teachers' voices & words & with how their face looks & what their body is doing.

This is why I prefer to look away when people are talking to me, because it means I can hear their words without having to play my matching game.

And while mentioning looking, looking into someone's eyes when they're talking to me can be painful. I don't know how else to explain that.

Even though socialisation isn't easy, I still really want to have friends & experience friendships. I worry a lot that I'll do or say something wrong or that I might upset someone with something I've done or said.

I have a few friends & these friendships are really important to me.

I need to work extra hard to fit in, to feel as though I belong & hope that no one can tell that I'm struggling to understand what's going on.

I watch how my friends act & how they sound & copy them. This makes me feel better knowing it won't be too obvious when I get confused. I've become a bit of an expert doing this. I read somewhere that it's like being an actor & it's actually called Autistic masking.

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Masking is really exhausting. At the end of the school day, I like to be left alone & listen to my music, just so I can rest my brain & body from working so hard.

Recess & lunchtimes can be harder for me than some of my classes. I sometimes need a rest from these rest times.

My friends sometimes help me when I misunderstand something by & also teach me better ways of saying something or doing something in a more friendly way.

Being part of group conversations can be really confusing for me as there are lots of people to listen to & watch. One-on-one conversations are easier. Oh & also why I'm not a massive fan of group class work.

Sometimes when I'm feeling upset about something I might not always want to join in & play with my friends as I might just need time to myself to work through some uncomfortable feelings or get over a really noisy music class.

I'm lucky that my friends understand that my saying no to joining in, is because I can't & not because I don't want to.

I'm also really happy that they keep asking me to join them in games or conversations because they know when I'm able to, I will. They've had to explain to me also that I don't need to wait to be asked to play with them.

The world can be really loud & confusing for me.

When it gets too much my emotions overwhelm me & I can lose control over my thoughts, feelings & actions. I can say & do things I wouldn't normally say or do.

It won't be one thing that gets me super angry, it's usually a combination of a lot of little things that's happened throughout my day.

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Making Neurodiversity... Literally

My Autism doesn't make me get really angry, lose control or even say really mean things to the people I love. This happens because I get dysregulated.

What this means is that my brain & my body are overloaded & no longer able to process or filter all of the information coming in.

When my brain gets too full or too fuzzy, I can't process anything, let alone control my reactions, feelings & emotions.

It's like when a computer crashes because too many Apps, tabs & programs are open, the computer heats up & the fans start spinning so hard to cool the machine down, that it sounds like an airplane taking off. And then the computer crashes.

Sometimes my body has no choice but to crash, force-quit & re-boot. This is called a meltdown.

My eyes & ears don't seem to work when I'm having a meltdown, so trying to talk to me won't be understood. I just need some space & time to regulate myself. It can sometimes take 5 minutes & sometimes way longer... It really depends on how intense my feelings are.

When it appears that I've calmed down, just like the computer, the fans are still whizzing to cool the battery down. It's important to know that although I might appear to be ok, I could be fighting my own thoughts & feelings from coming out.

The computer, like me, just needs some time to cool off.

When I'm feeling more regulated or in balance, I can be exhausted from all of the strong feelings & emotions that have been whizzing through my body. I can also feel really sad, & even ashamed of my behaviour when I was angry.

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I used to have lots of meltdowns at school. As I'm getting older & maturing I'm learning how to better manage these feelings, & when I'm able to, I can use some strategies that help me at those times.

If you notice when I'm feeling overwhelmed or getting close to the point of explosion, giving me a safe space to work on these feelings is really helpful. My parents will thank you too as it means that I won't need to hold onto these negative & upsetting feelings until the end of the day, & explode at mum or dad at school pick time.

I don't always get so angry that I meltdown. Sometimes I'm able to comfort myself by doing things that make sense to me & feel satisfying like lining up my toys, ordering my textas into rainbow colour order, swinging on monkey bars, acting out stories I've made up & even spinning around while singing my favourite song (& sometimes out loud too). This is called stimming or self-soothing behaviours.

When I do these things, I'm trying to keep myself in balance. Even when I appear calm, I can still feel out of control & those things that I do or like help me.

There are things that I need to do & these make me feel less anxious.

- \* I like to know things in advance
- \* I have a daily schedule & routine & this gives me a sense of control.
- \* Predictability comforts me.
- \* If there's an unexpected change to my routine, to my schedule, to what I've been told will happen, to the rules of a game we're playing or when something happens in a way that I wasn't expecting, if something seems unfair to me it can be really upsetting & uncomfortable for me.

I can't just 'get over it' or 'get on with it', but it helps a lot if I'm given reasons for the changes, as well as time to process the changes.

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Taking Neurodiversity... Literally

I also do certain rituals or routines every day that also helps me stay in control & regulated. If I'm not able to do them it can really stress me out.

There are times when I'm so overwhelmed & dysregulated, that I do the exact opposite of melting down. I shut down. Just like a computer that needs to be left alone to recharge.

My friends know that leaving me alone when I'm shut down works best. Just because I look calm & not having a meltdown, my thoughts & feelings are just as intense.

When I'm in shutdown I'm unable to talk. My friends & I made up a thumbs-down signal when I can't talk so I can let them know I can't. I don't want to come across as being rude, as ignoring them or making them feel unimportant.

I've used my thumb-down signal with some of my teachers too & they know I'm not purposefully ignoring them or being rude.

Not being able to talk is called situational mutism. It used to be called selective-mutism, but that suggests I have a choice on the matter, which I don't.

I could keep talking about being Autistic for hours & hours. Some might even call this my 'special interest'.

I've done a lot of explaining about the way my brain processes information & also shared what happens when there's too much to process at once.

But what I want you to all know about Autism & all this processing is that Autistic people, that I, don't have a processing error. Being Autistic means I have a different operating system.

I might miss a lot of things, but I also catch what a lot of people miss.



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And when it comes to my favourite topic, which is Star Wars, I know absolutely everything there is to know about all things Star Wars. And good luck shutting me up.

Autism is not an illness or a disease. You can't catch it. You also can't cure Autism, because like I just said it's not an illness or disease.

There's nothing wrong with me or missing in me. And I'm definitely not a puzzle that needs solving.

There have been lots of people who have tried to change Autistic people or tried to re-program Autistic people to be more like everyone else. I'm really glad that I won't ever have to experience this. And also, I'm not sure I want to be like anyone else because I love being me.

I love my Autism. My Autistic brain is incredible, it's wonderful & I'm so lucky to have it.

That's not to say that I don't struggle sometimes, & on some days, a lot of the time, but I always remind myself that having a different brain doesn't mean my brain is bad or wrong.

It's just different.

And different doesn't mean deficient, defective or disjointed.

Differences are powerful & something that I'm really proud of & something that needs to be celebrated by everyone.

Thank you for listening!