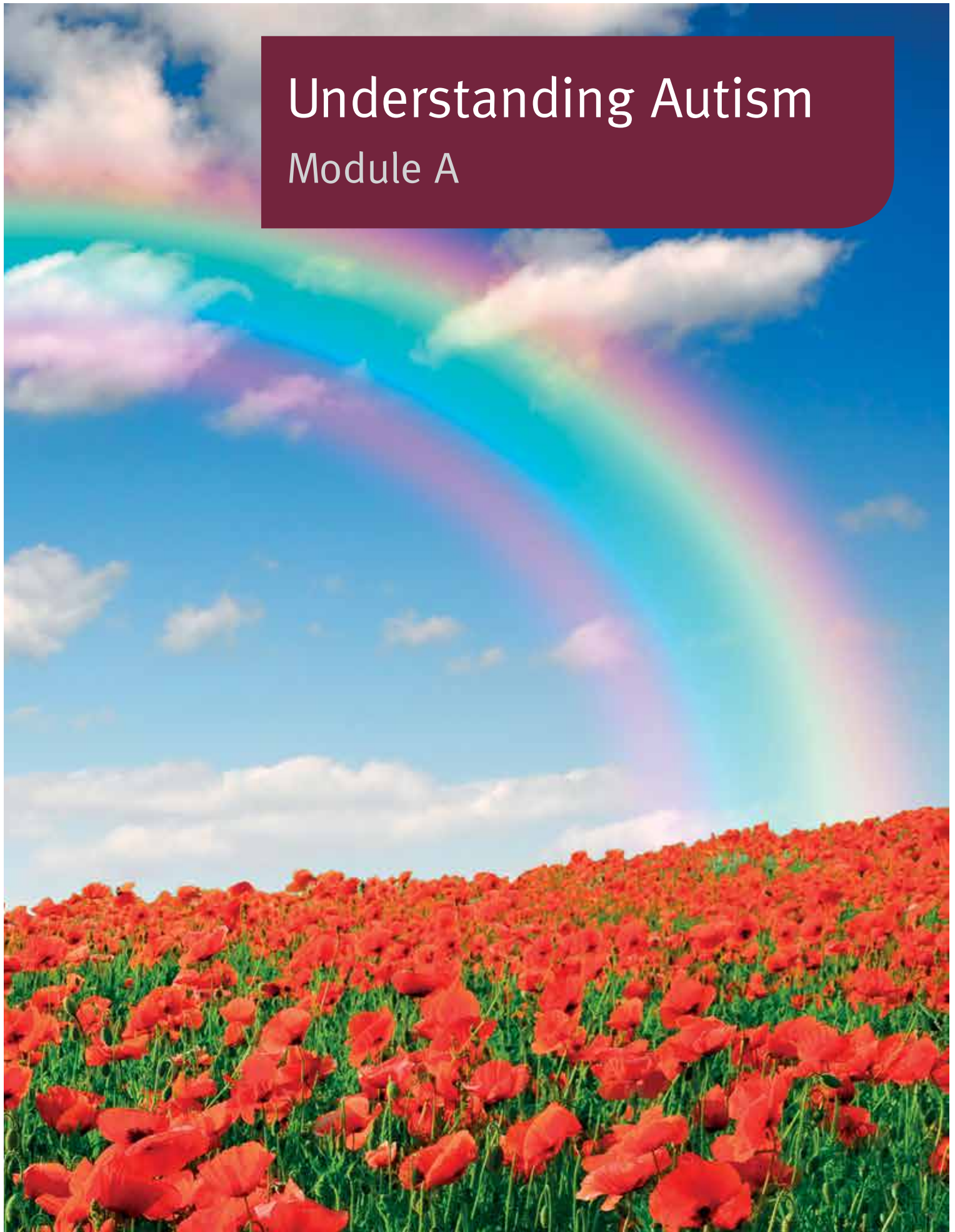


Understanding Autism

Module A



About the Level 2 Certificate in Understanding Autism

We understand much more about autism than we did a generation ago. In fact, in the last 30 years the number of people diagnosed with autism has increased 25 fold. This is because of a general increased awareness of autism, improved diagnosis and the inclusion of a wider range of forms of autism, such as Asperger syndrome.

This increased awareness has led to many improvements; however, individuals with autism continue to face problems and challenges. These need to be tackled. For example, children and young people with autism are much more likely to be excluded from school (two-thirds of children with autism are educated in mainstream schools). They are also more at risk of bullying. Indeed, primary school children with special educational needs are twice as likely as other children to suffer from persistent bullying (Chatzitheochari et al., 2014). These experiences often lead to issues in later life, such as mental health difficulties, low confidence and poor self-esteem.

Although statistics such as these are worrying, we know that individuals with autism can succeed at school and in later life. There are many fantastic examples of well-informed, inclusive and empowering environments that enable individuals with autism to thrive. With the right support and understanding, autism need not be a barrier to enjoying a fulfilled and happy life.

This course aims to help you to develop your understanding of autism and how you can support individuals with autism in a range of different contexts, whether you work in health, social care or a children's or young people's setting, or in any role where you have contact with individuals with autism. It will help you to understand the characteristics of autism, and appreciate the importance of seeing each person with autism as a unique individual, with a unique set of needs, strengths and abilities. To this end, this course promotes a person-centred approach and the importance of positive communication methods throughout.

Aims

The aims of the course are to develop knowledge and understanding of autism in terms of:

- the context of supporting individuals;
- using a person-centred approach to support individuals;
- communication and social interaction;
- sensory processing, perception and cognition;
- supporting positive behaviour;
- supporting individuals to live healthy and fulfilled lives.

Course content

This course has six units. These have been grouped together into three modules:

Module A

Unit 1: Introduction to autism

Unit 2: Using a person-centred approach to support individuals with autism

Module B

Unit 3: Communication and social interaction in individuals with autism

Unit 4: Sensory processing, perception and cognition in individuals with autism

Module C

Unit 5: Supporting positive behaviour in individuals with autism

Unit 6: Supporting individuals with autism to live healthy and fulfilled lives

This unit provides an introduction to autism and the range of characteristics and differences associated with the condition. You will explore why awareness of autism is increasing, and how it is recognised and diagnosed. The unit also covers a range of different conditions that may occur with autism, and theories and common misconceptions about autism.

Aims

When you have worked through this unit you will:

- understand what is meant by autism;
- know theories that relate to autism;
- know how autism is diagnosed;
- understand the characteristics that may be present in individuals with autism;
- know about conditions that commonly co-occur with autism;
- understand common misconceptions surrounding autism.

Content

This unit contains six sections:

Section 1: Understanding autism

Section 2: Characteristics of autism

Section 3: Diagnosing autism

Section 4: Conditions that commonly co-occur with autism

Section 5: Theoretical models relating to autism

Section 6: Common misconceptions about autism

Section 1

Understanding autism

In this section you will learn about the range of social and communication conditions and developmental disorders that make up the autism spectrum.

You will look at the following areas:

- What is autism?
- Autism as a spectrum condition
- The importance of recognising autism as a lifelong condition

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability affecting one in every 100 people in the United Kingdom. It is a complex condition because although there are **many common characteristics**, these **vary considerably between different individuals**. As you will learn later, this is why autism is described as a **spectrum condition**.

Autism affects **how an individual communicates and interacts with others**. It also affects **how they make sense of the world around them**.

One aspect of autism that affects many people is a difficulty in **processing sensory information**, and this can influence the way that individuals react to the environment and their behaviour. As a result, individuals may feel overwhelmed and experience a great deal of **anxiety** in some situations. Some individuals may exhibit a range of behavioural characteristics (including repetitive behaviour) which may be a way of helping them to cope in these situations. The need for **structure and routine** may also be a coping strategy and this is another common characteristic of autism. More details about all these characteristics can be found in Section 2 of this unit.

Autism is a lifelong condition, and though there is no 'cure' there are many strategies that can be used to support individuals with autism to live fulfilled and healthy lives. Some individuals may have the ability to live and work independently, while others might need significant support for the rest of their lives.



Key point

It is not possible to identify whether someone has autism from a person's appearance, and for this reason it is often described as a **'hidden disability'**.

The different types of autism

As the characteristics of autism can vary between different people, a number of terms are often used to describe it, including:

- autism spectrum condition;
- Asperger syndrome;
- high-functioning autism.

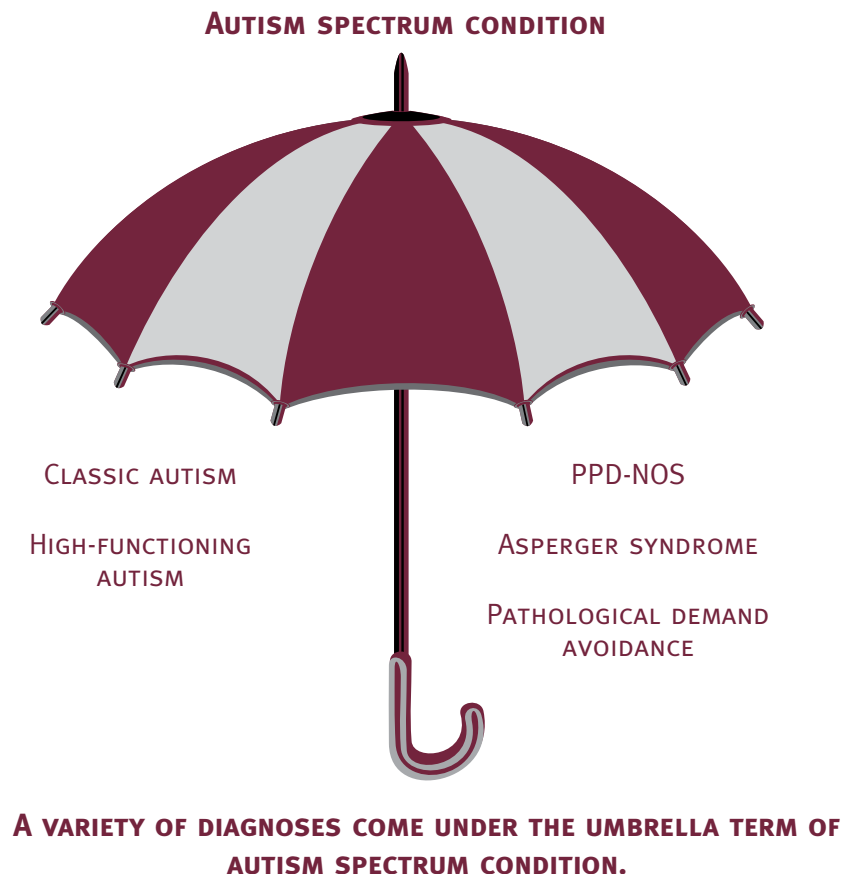
AUTISM SPECTRUM CONDITION

Autism spectrum condition (ASC) is an umbrella term for all forms of this developmental disability that affects social interaction, communication, behaviour and interests. It includes the range of different 'sub-types' or variations that are included in the diagnosis of autism. These variations are all described as being **'on the autism spectrum'**.

The term 'autism spectrum disorder', which has the same meaning, is also used, but most professionals in the United Kingdom prefer to refer to autism as a *condition* rather than a disorder.

Every person with autism is unique and the characteristics vary, including the degree to which an individual is affected. A significant number of individuals with autism (around 50 per cent) have a learning disability.

A variety of diagnoses come under the umbrella term of ASC (see diagram). For example, some people use **'Kanner's autism'** or **'classic autism'** to describe autism diagnosed in childhood and where there is speech and language delay. This form is usually diagnosed early in childhood, around the age of three, when the delay in development comes to the attention of parents and health professionals. This may depend on the range of characteristics and how intense they are, and some children may not be diagnosed until they are older.



All forms of autism are **lifelong conditions present from birth**, and though the signs are usually seen in childhood this is not always the case. ASC may occur in individuals across a broad range of intellectual ability, ranging from low to high IQ. People with autism who have average or above average intelligence are often referred to as **‘high functioning’** or may have a form of autism currently known as **Asperger syndrome**.

ASPERGER SYNDROME

Named after the Austrian paediatrician Hans Asperger who first identified this condition, Asperger syndrome is a form of autism. Although people with Asperger syndrome share the same difficulties with social interaction associated with autism, they **do not have problems with speech and language delay**. Because of this, Asperger syndrome is usually **diagnosed later in childhood**. Many people with Asperger syndrome, especially those who are now over 30 years old, **may never have been diagnosed**. Individuals may have struggled through school, having been bullied and unable to make friends, feeling different and being seen as ‘odd’ or ‘weird’ by others into adulthood. It is not uncommon for adults to recognise their own characteristics when reading an article about Asperger syndrome, or if a family member is diagnosed with autism.

Individuals with Asperger syndrome are **usually of average to above average intelligence** and may be quite advanced in some areas. They may have learning difficulties such as dyslexia, or dyspraxia (the latter meaning a delayed development of coordination and movement).

Sensory

Individuals with autism may have difficulties with processing sensory information. This is not a form of sensory impairment; instead, it is the **inability to filter the information received from sensory 'stimuli'** (information) in the environment. Sometimes this enhances individuals' sensory experience, for example the ability to see every minute detail.

Individuals with autism may have the following characteristics:

- Individuals may be **hypersensitive** (have high sensitivity) or **hyposensitive** (have low sensitivity) to sounds, bright lights, clothing, different tastes and smells. Some individuals can be so sensitive that certain clothing can be painful against the skin.
- **Images** can appear fragmented into different areas of detail, so that individuals focus on one area.
- **Noises** can sound amplified, or individuals may have difficulty in separating out background noise. Sometimes individuals with autism will cover their ears.
- **Flavours** can taste very strong and many people with autism may appear to be 'picky' with food. This may also be a response to the different textures of food.
- Individuals may be very sensitive to strong **smells**; this can cause problems with toilet training.
- Children with autism may have a high **pain threshold**. For example, they may not react when they fall over or bump their head.



How characteristics vary between individuals

“ If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism. ”

Stephen Shore, a professor who researches the needs of people with autism and who himself has autism

As autism is a spectrum condition, individuals will vary in the range and intensity of their characteristics. It is important that people do not base their understanding of autism on one person, as this would provide a very narrow picture of the condition.

Individual characteristics may **vary in relation to a number of factors**, in different ways. Below are some examples of how these characteristics can vary from individual to individual.

The type or form of autism

There are **variations between different forms of autism**. For example:

- An individual with Asperger syndrome may develop speech and language early, whereas other forms of autism are often accompanied by delayed speech and language.
- One characteristic of pathological demand avoidance (PDA) is controlling, domineering and manipulative behaviour, which may not be seen in other forms of autism.
- Not all individuals have sensory differences, and those that do may be either over-sensitive (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive).

The presence of other conditions

The presence of other conditions will affect the strength and type of characteristics a person with autism has. For example:

- If an individual with autism also has **a learning disability**, this will affect their ability to learn and develop new skills.
- Individuals vary in the amount of **anxiety** they experience and the way they react to environmental factors.
- Individuals who lack supportive social networks may become **depressed** due to their social isolation. This in turn may affect their ability and willingness to access support.

Gender

Girls are thought to be able to mask their characteristics more effectively than boys. It has been suggested that this is because of gender differences – for example, **girls tend to develop speech and language earlier than boys** of the same age and learn to copy social skills more effectively. Current research indicates that some girls are undiagnosed as they do not present in the way that even the professionals expect.

Age

Over the years, individuals may **learn** the communication and social skills that typically develop earlier, and may have developed good **coping strategies**. Individuals may also learn to **disguise** their characteristics more effectively.

Education, intervention and support

A number of factors can impact on individuals with autism. For example:

- The timing and quality of support can help to improve outcomes for individuals. **Early intervention** helps to ensure the best possible outcomes for that individual.
- Individuals who have **personalised support** and access to **specialist services**, for example appropriate education and speech and language therapy, are more likely to progress.
- Adults who **have not been diagnosed** may never have received appropriate support.



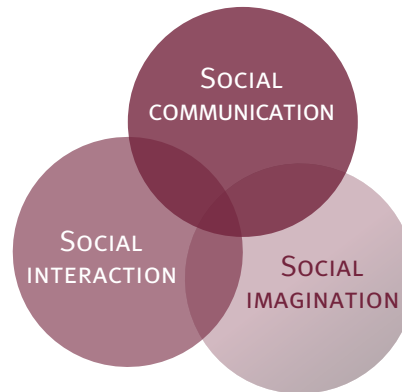
All individuals with autism are different and each will have a **different profile of characteristics**.

The triad of impairments

In 1979, Dr Lorna Wing and Dr Judith Gould created a simple model to classify the common characteristics of autism. They identified three key areas (a triad) of impairment that are common to everyone with autism:

- **social communication** – communication skills;
- **social interaction** – relating to others;
- **social imagination** – interests, activities and behaviour.

There will be variations in the way that each individual experiences these impairments. In the diagram below each of the circles represents one of these impairments. The area where the circles overlap shows where autism occurs. The circles may not always appear so evenly distributed – some people may have more marked differences in one ‘circle’ than another, whilst others may have minimal overlap.



THE TRIAD OF IMPAIRMENTS – THE AREA WHERE THE CIRCLES OVERLAP SHOWS WHERE AUTISM OCCURS.

These key areas of impairment may appear to be quite similar at first. Looking at each of the core areas in more detail provides a good overview of the characteristics of autism.

- **Social communication (communication skills)** – Individuals with autism have difficulty in communicating with others. This may vary dramatically between different individuals. While some may be early talkers and speak fluently, others may never develop speech and may remain non-verbal.
- **Social interaction (relating to others)** – Individuals with autism may struggle with the more subtle aspects of interacting with others and making friends. They may lack awareness of **reciprocal social interaction** (how to respond in a conventional way), which is a complex process that many people do intuitively.
- **Social imagination (interests, activities and behaviour)** – This impairment is most often misunderstood, as individuals with autism can be very creative, but its impact can be observed in what is called an ‘inflexible’ or ‘rigid’ thought process, difficulty in coping with changes to routine, and repetitive behaviour.

The triad of impairment has evolved and been adapted over the years, particularly as the presence of other key characteristics, such as sensory difficulties, has become widely recognised.



The triad of impairments was developed by Wing and Gould to illustrate **three key areas of difficulty** common to all people with autism.

Introduction to autism: Key points

- It is not possible to identify whether someone has autism from a person's appearance, and for this reason it is often described as a **'hidden disability'**.
- Autism is a **developmental disorder** that affects social communication, social interaction and social imagination.
- Particular characteristics are associated with autism, and their intensity varies between individuals. Autism is a **spectrum condition**, and **each individual is unique**.
- Autism is a **lifelong condition** – every child with autism grows up to be an adult with autism.
- All individuals with autism are different and each will have a **different profile of characteristics**.
- The triad of impairments was developed by Wing and Gould to illustrate **three key areas of difficulty** common to all people with autism.
- There are positive and negative aspects to the triad of impairments. Some experts now look at **two key areas of difficulty**.
- The prevalence of autism has **increased 25 fold in the last 30 years** because of increased awareness, improved diagnosis and the inclusion of a wider range of forms of autism.
- Although there are **clear benefits to obtaining a diagnosis**, some individuals with autism, or parents of children with autism, are **reluctant to seek a diagnosis**.
- Mental ill-health and learning disability are both more common in people with autism than among the general population. Though they are separate conditions they are **often associated with autism**.
- The term **neurodiverse** is often used and preferred by many people in the autism community to refer to people who have autism, and **neurotypical** to describe those who do not have autism.
- Discriminatory attitudes and a lack of understanding add to the **stress** of both parents and children and create a **social barrier**.
- There are many myths and misunderstandings about autism. The **outcomes** for individuals with autism **are significantly improved** when people take the time to learn more about the reality of the condition.
- Discrimination can occur inadvertently when there is a **lack of understanding** surrounding autism.

Unit 2

Using a person-centred approach to support individuals with autism

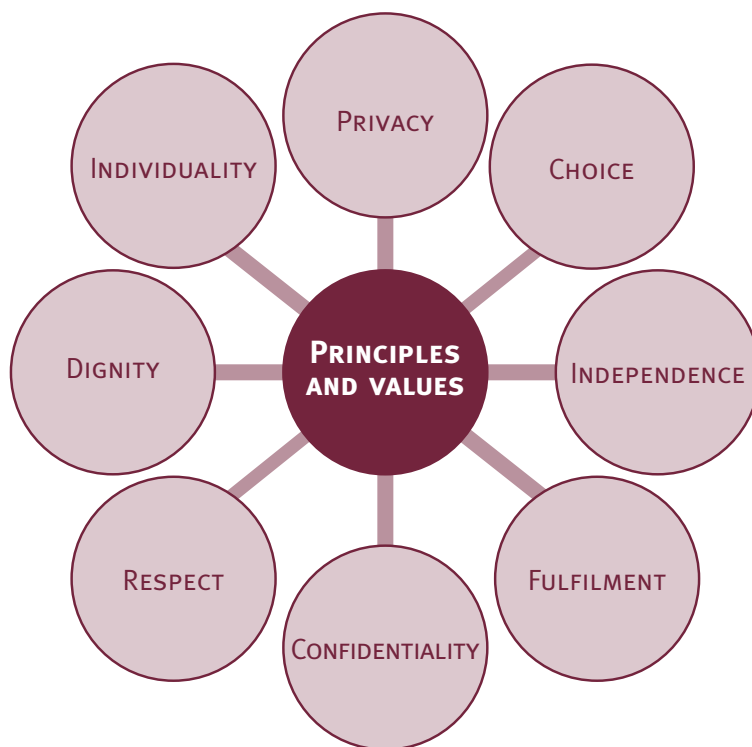


Promoting the rights of individuals with autism

Some rights are set in law, for example human rights and rights that promote equality. There are other rights that are not protected by law, but are generally expected within our society and are particularly important for individuals using care or support services.

These are often referred to as **person-centred values** (see diagram).

These rights should be upheld in different health, social care or support settings, and they are monitored by regulating bodies, for example Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (in England) when they carry out inspections.



PERSON-CENTRED VALUES.

Activity A11

What do these terms mean? Choose the right word to match the definitions below.

Independence
Confidentiality

Fulfilment
Privacy

Individuality
Choice

Dignity
Respect

1. Observing an individual's right to their personal life, free from intrusion.
2. Respect for an individual's self-esteem, worth and value at all times.
3. Support for an individual that acknowledges their right to think and act without being influenced by others.
4. Providing opportunities for an individual to select from a range of options.
5. Each individual is unique and has different needs and aspirations.
6. Treating each individual as someone of worth and value.
7. Treating information you have about an individual as their property, and only sharing it with their consent and under agreed guidelines.
8. Being able to achieve personal aspirations and abilities in all aspects of daily living.

You can check your answers at the end of this module.

Once armed with an understanding of person-centred values or rights, it is then important that these are **actively promoted** by those who provide support to individuals with autism. Below are some examples of how this can be done.

Promoting individuality

Individuality is at the heart of child-centred or person-centred practice. It involves **understanding the identity and background** of the individuals you support. When you know about a child's or young person's family and background or their favourite toys and films, you can communicate with them and plan activities that are more likely to interest them.

Using a person-centred approach to support individuals with autism: Key points

- Because autism is a spectrum condition, individuals have a wide range of needs, so **a number of different laws are relevant** to them. Those who provide support to individuals with autism should have an understanding of how this legislation and associated guidance applies to them.
- Person-centred care means placing the individual at the centre of the process, focusing on their needs, wishes and aspirations, and using **what they would like to happen** as a starting point.
- A range of tools and approaches can be used to help others to work and think in a person-centred way.
- Working with an individual's strengths and abilities can help to **achieve positive outcomes**.
- Effective **partnership working is vital** to improving the experience of living with autism. If informal carers, professionals and the agencies involved in a person's care work together, the **needs and aspirations of the individual** are much more likely to be met.