



Autism
Alliance of Canada

Alliance canadienne de
l'autisme

Language Guide

10th Annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit

April 2024

Context

The way we use words is powerful and shapes how we see the world. It also affects how we see ourselves and others. People have different opinions about how we should talk about autism. Some say we should use person-first language, like saying “person with autism.” Others prefer identity-first language, such as “Autistic person.”

More and more, research and writings from the community show that many Autistic people don't like person-first language. They think it might make the stigma (negative views) around autism worse. Identity-first language says that being Autistic is a big part of who a person is. After looking at the research and hearing from Autistic members of Autism Alliance of Canada, **we have adopted identity-first language or neutral language in our work and throughout the Summit.**

Using this guide

This resource aims to offer guidance rooted in the experiences of Autistic people, without aligning with any particular stance or perspective. It is intended to serve as a resource promoting a strength-based approach to autism and underscores the significance of language in everyday interactions. **It's essential to remember that this guide should not override the preferences of the Autistic person you are interacting with; rather, it serves as a flexible tool for respectful communication.**

Terminology

At the Canadian Autism Leadership Summit, we prioritize inclusive communication through two key guidelines:

Accessible Language:

- We encourage clear and easily understandable language, accessible to people of all ages and abilities, doing our best to avoid technical terms and informal slang.

Empowering language:

- We advocate for stories that empower individuals, discouraging the use of negative terms like “suffer,” “outburst,” or “aggression.” Our language choices profoundly shape attitudes towards disabilities, underscoring the importance of promoting inclusivity and respect when discussing with and about Autistic people.

Capitalization

When it comes to discussing autism, we've learned from our community that it's important to consider how we use language. Many people prefer to see 'Autistic' capitalized when referring to themselves or their communities, as it acknowledges their identity and respects their preferences. For instance, 'Autistic person' or 'Autistic community' are examples of this. This mirrors the practice in other communities like the Deaf and Blind communities. However, when discussing traits, conditions, or the broader concept of autism, the community often prefers not to capitalize. This approach, shared by many, allows us to talk about autism respectfully while recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of each person's experience.

The table below provides general recommendations for preferred terms and language considerations regarding autism. Language surrounding autism continues to evolve, and these recommendations are based on insights gathered from the diverse experiences and perspectives of folks on the autism spectrum.

Non-Preferred Language	Preferred Language	Language Considerations	Examples from a research context
<p>Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*</p> <p>“Dysfunction”</p> <p>“Syndrome”</p>	<p>Autism</p> <p>Autism Spectrum</p> <p>Autism Spectrum Condition</p>	<p>Autism is often seen through a medical lens, which can lead to negative ideas that it is something that needs fixing or curing.</p> <p>*While “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” especially the 'disorder' part, is not preferred by the Autistic community, it is an official diagnostic term used for Autism in the clinical community.</p>	<p>‘Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition...’</p>
<p>Person-first language</p> <p>e.g. “person with autism”</p> <p>e.g. “person living with autism”</p>	<p>Identity-first language e.g. “Autistic person” or “the Autistic community” (this includes Autistic people only)</p> <p>Neutral language e.g. “person on the autism spectrum”</p>	<p>Using identify-first language highlights that autism is a core part of who a person is, while person-first language implies a separation between the individual and their autism.</p>	<p>‘A total of 125 Autistic adults participated in the study.’</p>
<p>“Restricted interests”</p> <p>“Obsessions”</p> <p>“Special Interests”</p> <p>“Special Needs”</p>	<p>“Specialized”</p> <p>“Focused”</p> <p>“Intense interests”</p>	<p>Using terms that frame autism in a deficient or pathological context undermine the interests of Autistic people rather than accepting and celebrating their characteristics.</p>	<p>‘The participant had specialized interests in computers and politics.’</p>

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“Comorbidity”	“Co-occurring” “Concurrent”	While autism may accompany other instances of neurodivergence or medical conditions, it's important to note that autism is not a disease.	‘Individuals with co-occurring medical conditions were excluded from the study.’
Labels relating to functioning (e.g., high or low functioning) Labels relating to severity (e.g., mild, moderate or severe)	“High or low support needs” Describing the specific support needs.	Remembering that every Autistic person possesses a diverse array of strengths, skills, barriers, and support needs, which may fluctuate over time and in various situations and environments.	‘Individuals with sensory and communication support needs.’
“Symptoms” “Impairments”	Describing specific autistic experiences and characteristics.	Using terms such as ‘symptoms’ and ‘impairments’ can make it seem like the experiences of Autistic people are not acceptable.	‘This study included participants who are Autistic and have a heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli.’
“Nonverbal”	“Nonspeaking”	Many nonspeaking people use forms of communication beyond verbal speech.	‘This study focused on the experiences of nonspeaking Autistics’

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<p>“At risk of”</p> <p>“Suffers from”</p> <p>“Are victims of”</p>	<p>“May be Autistic”</p> <p>“At increased likelihood of being Autistic”</p> <p>“Has an autism diagnosis or a diagnosis of autism”</p> <p>“Identifies as Autistic”</p>	<p>Using terms like “risk” suggests that autism is something to be avoided or prevented.</p>	<p>‘Children with an increased likelihood of being Autistic were also included in the study.’</p>
<p>“Challenging behaviour”</p> <p>“Disruptive behaviour”</p> <p>“Problem behaviour”</p>	<p>“Meltdown” (when uncontrollable behaviour)</p> <p>“Stimming” (when relevant)</p> <p>Describing the specific behaviour.</p>	<p>Using specific terms that describe the behaviour, what it may look like, as well as what it may impact. help to provide clarity, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the behavior.</p>	
<p>“Normal”</p> <p>“Healthy”</p> <p>“Control”</p> <p>“Normative sample”</p>	<p>“Comparison groups” (with description of relevant group characteristics).</p>	<p>Using terms that portray autism as a difference rather than an abnormality.</p> <p>The discussion continues about whether to use "Allistic" or "Non-Autistic" to describe people who do identify as Autistic.</p>	

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<p>“Curing autism”</p> <p>“Treating autism”</p> <p>“Recovering from autism”</p>	<p>“Supports”</p> <p>“Adjustments”</p> <p>“Access requirements”</p> <p>“Needs”</p> <p>Describing the specific autistic characteristics, features, traits, support or services.</p>	<p>Using terms that suggest Autistic people require a “cure to fix them” can contribute to negative perceptions or to stigmatization.</p> <p>Discussions should focus on the person and outcomes that improve their quality of life, rather than attempting to alter autism characteristics.</p> <p>Autistic people may find value in personalized support tailored to their specific needs and strengths.</p>	<p>‘Participants received occupational therapy to reduce sensory overload for those with high sensory needs.’</p>

As language surrounding autism continues to evolve, it is our responsibility to keep up with the changes and ensure to use language that respects the preferences of the Autistic community. Autism Alliance of Canada is dedicated to fostering inclusive and safe spaces for our members and the broader community. We invite you to [join us](#) in this mission.

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About Autism Alliance of Canada

Autism Alliance of Canada is a pan-Canadian network that is composed of a diverse membership, including Autistic people, caregivers, clinicians, researchers, policy makers, and organizations across Canada.

We work together as a shared leadership movement to champion a National Autism Strategy that ensures Autistic people have equal rights and opportunities for full participation and acceptance in Canadian society. We harness the power of collective impact as an inclusive organization whose members, board of directors and staff reflect our commitment to Autistic participation in all aspects of our work.

About the Canadian Autism Leadership Summit

The Canadian Autism Leadership Summit (“Summit”) serves as a gathering for Autistic people, families, community leaders, decision-makers, and researchers to convene and deliberate on matters crucial to advancing a National Autism Strategy. By coming together, we amplify our voices and strengthen our impact.

Autism Alliance of Canada utilizes the Summit as a platform to drive progress on mutual goals, working towards a more inclusive Canada. Through the development of autism policies that embrace the diverse perspectives of Autistic people across Canada and their loved ones, we strive to create a space that values diversity and inclusion.

Fostering an inclusive atmosphere at the Summit is crucial because it brings together people from various backgrounds and abilities. We strive to create an environment where everyone feels respected and valued. By promoting inclusivity, we want to make sure that everyone feels heard and that diverse perspectives contribute to our collective efforts towards meaningful change.

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