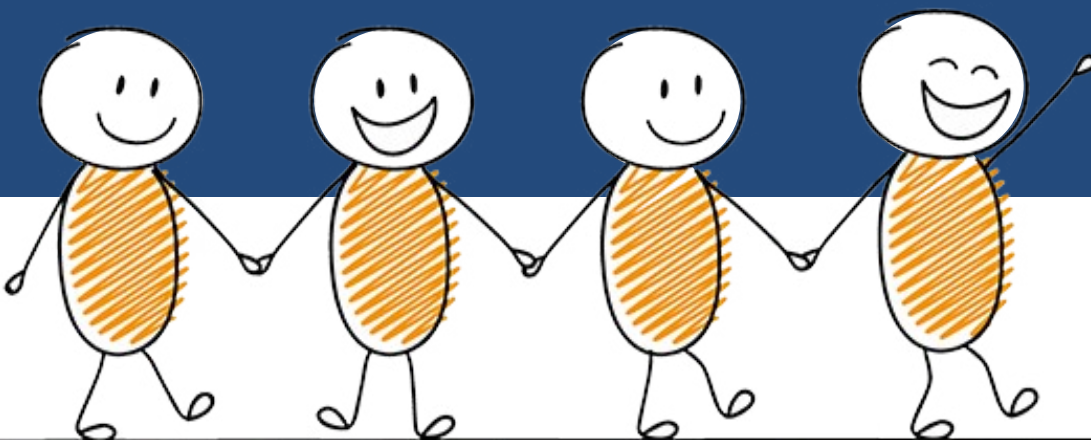


Guide to Attracting & Engaging Autistic Volunteers

STEP

1

A Shared
Understanding



These resources were developed by Empower Autism.

Empower Autism is a well-established, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to providing information, support and capacity development services to autistic people, their parents, carers and families. Empower Autism's vision is a world where autistic people fully participate, contribute and succeed to their fullest potential with confidence and self-belief.

Volunteers have been the heart of Empower Autism for the life of the organisation, which was established in 1994. The organisation currently has over 50 volunteers, who assist across a range of programs and services.

With over 30% of their staff and 47% of their volunteers identifying as autistic, and 30 years of experience supporting a team of neurodiverse volunteers, Empower Autism was well placed to develop these resources to build capacity in the sector.

These resources provide autism affirming information alongside practical and easy-to-implement tips based on extensive experience. They are designed to get you started on your journey to becoming more accessible and inclusive. We have included further links to expand your understanding to suit your organisational needs.

We encourage you to share this resource with other volunteering organisations and your broader community.

Acknowledging our support partners

This project was made possible by [Volunteering Queensland](#) with the support of the Australian Government Department of Social Services.



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

We would like to also acknowledge the team from **Amaze** who provided feedback and guidance on the content of these resources via a formal review process.

Feedback

We value feedback, as this enables us continuously to improve the supports and resources we provide to volunteer organisations. We would greatly appreciate you completing a survey on your experience using these resources. To complete, please follow this [link](#)



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About this Resource

Welcome to your journey to becoming a more inclusive and accessible volunteering organisation!

This journey will involve three steps, each aiming to provide you with simple and practical tools to increase your organisations accessibility and engagement with the autistic community. This includes:

Step 1:

Developing a Shared Understanding

Step 2:

Attracting and Engaging Autistic Volunteers

Step 3:

Supporting and Retaining Autistic Volunteers

We encourage you to work through each section progressively given each step builds on the last. If you want to extend your knowledge in a particular area, we have provided links to [External Resources](#) at the end of this guide that are relevant to each section.

Throughout your journey, we aim to provide:

- A more accessible volunteering environment for the autistic community
- Increased confidence to attract and engage autistic volunteers
- Easy to use tools and resources to implement change
- Greater access to volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds and strengths

You will note that there is an absence of medical and clinical language when describing autism in these resources. This is intentional, as we approach autism from the social model of disability, emphasising the strengths and unique characteristics of the autistic community while trying to enact societal change by addressing and removing unintentional barriers that may exist. You can find out more about the social model of disability from [People with Disability Australia](#).

Along your journey you will become accustomed to this perspective, and hopefully recognise that the autistic community has a range of different experiences that can bring valuable and unique skills to the volunteering sector.

First, we will begin with some basic information regarding autism, working to create a foundation for the practical changes ahead.

What is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects how people interact with the world around them.

These differences aren't necessarily positive or negative – they are just that – different!

In Australia, around [1 in 100 people identify as autistic](#), and many more have a personal connection to someone with autism.

Everyone with autism has their own unique experience, with some individuals requiring just a little bit of support while others require more. This may be in the form of a support worker or technology. There are some common characteristics to autism which may be shared amongst the community.

Common Characteristics of Autism

Common characteristics refer to several contexts where an autistic individual may experience the world in a distinct and unique way. These characteristics are often understood across several broad areas, including:

Interests & Routines

Communication

Executive Functioning

Sensory processing

As a starting point, we have provided some examples below to give you a general idea of what these characteristics can look like in an autistic person. We will cover these more in-depth in [Step 3: Supporting Unique Preferences](#).

Prior to that, we would like to briefly highlight that any given member of the autistic community will have their own unique way of interacting with the world around them.

To quote **Dr Stephen Shore**,

“If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism”.

CONTEXT	WHAT CAN IT LOOK LIKE?
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Direct, honest and literal in communication » Focus on meaningful conversations instead of small talk » Strong ability to understand and appreciate literal language
Sensory Processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Heightened (or lowered) sensitivity and awareness to certain sensations » Preference for quiet environments and low-sensory environments
Executive Functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Unique and intuitive approaches to addressing problems, using visual and spatial characteristics » Ability to intensely focus and sustain attention on a singular task » A preference for tasks that are goal-oriented and broken down into steps
Interests and Routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Pursuing specific interests in great detail, often to an expert level » Engaging in activities that involve direct and concrete problem-solving » Preference for established routines and predictable structures

If you are a visual learner, the autism wheel is another way of expressing this sense of individuality. While everyone shares a common bond within the autistic community, each individual has their own personal circumstances and preferences that give them their own different and unique shade of autism.



Illustration: Developed from the autism app wheel created by Mark Coppin in 2012

The Autism Wheel

In addition, it's important to recognise that there is a range of external organisations that provide research and evidence-based information. Learning from these organisations and their experiences can help you develop a comprehensive understanding of autism from a range of community members. You can find several examples in our [External Resources](#) section.

Key Takeaways

- While some common characteristics are shared amongst the autistic community, everyone has their own **unique preferences and style!**
- There are a range of organisations that aim to support the autistic community and provide valuable information and research (see External Resources).

Talking about Autism

Early views on autism were defined by a medical model of disability, often focussing on ‘fixing’ autism. This perspective separated the person from their autistic traits, describing autism in symptoms and impairments. A range of negative stereotypes accompanied this view, albeit unintentionally.

Over the past 30 years, movements in neurodiversity and self-advocacy challenged this perspective and begun embracing autism as a natural variation on the spectrum of human diversity.

Symptoms became unique characteristics. Autism became part of one’s identity.

We recommend reading Harvard’s [‘What is Neurodiversity’](#) publication for more background regarding the neurodiversity movement.

One of the major changes was a move from person-first to identity-first language, reflecting the adoption of autism into one’s identity (e.g., I am an autistic person) versus person-first language (e.g., I am a person living with autism) which separated autism from the individual.

We have provided a brief overview of how language has changed with several examples:

MEDICAL MODEL LANGUAGE	SOCIETAL CHANGE	AUTISTIC PREFERRED
<p>Person-first language</p> <p>Person living with autism Individual with autism Individual on the autism spectrum</p>	<p>→</p> <p>A movement towards neurodiversity</p> <p>→</p>	<p>Identity-first language</p> <p>Autie Autistic Neurodivergent</p>
<p>Symptoms and impairments</p>		<p>Unique characteristics and experiences</p>
<p>Co-morbidity</p>		<p>Co-occurring</p>
<p>Function (e.g. high/low functioning) and levels</p>		<p>Specific support needs</p>

While there is a preferred language style within the autistic community, we come from the perspective it is **okay to not be perfect**. How you refer to someone ultimately depends on the preferences of the individual and open communication.

What really matters is a focus on developing an attitude that reflects a genuine understanding and respect for the lived experience of autism. You take the time to listen, respect and reflect on individual preferences and experiences within the community.

If you are ever unsure of a certain word that is related to autism, we have also provided you with a [Glossary of Common Autistic Terms](#) that can explain commonly used concepts and phrases.

Key Takeaway

- No-one expects you to be perfect, but **taking the time to listen** and having a **willingness to understand** is key!

Autistic Volunteer Strengths

Understanding autism in the volunteering sector can be greatly supported by adopting a strengths-based approach.

This approach acknowledges that unique characteristics can be used to better understand, identify and match autistic volunteers to roles and environments where they can thrive.

While particular strengths can vary from person to person, several core strengths are common:

Detail-oriented
Respectful of rules
Empathetic

Articulate
Focused
Logical Thinking
Committed

Unique Skills & Experience
Intelligence
Special Interests

Strong sense of justice
Loyal
Honest

These are just a few examples of strengths from our experience with autistic volunteers. We have provided additional examples below of how these strengths translate to desirable characteristics in the volunteering sector.

Unique Skills, Experience & Special Interests	Autistic volunteers frequently find unique ways to engage with their environment, which can bring a new and unique set of skills, training and experience to your volunteering organisation.
Long-term commitment & Loyal	A tendency to prefer familiar environments and routines accompanied by a strong sense of loyalty means autistic volunteers may be interested in a long-term commitment to your volunteering organisation.
Strong sense of justice & Honest	A strong sense of justice tends to mean autistic volunteers are often trustworthy and ethical, which can create a reliable and loyal volunteer.
Respectful of rules	Autistic volunteers can thrive in places with clear guidelines and procedures – perfect for many of the fields that rely on volunteers and an organised approach.
Empathetic	Many autistic adults develop an empathetic understanding and appreciation for diversity through their own lived experience which can be extended to the communities your volunteering organisation supports.
Detail-Oriented	Often autistic adults have a keen eye for detail, noticing patterns and perspectives that other volunteers may overlook. Tasks that require high levels of focus and attention can be ideal for autistic volunteers.

Autism and Volunteering

This is just the beginning of your journey to creating a more autism affirming volunteering environment. Most of what we have discussed has been values-based, giving you an insight into the autistic community and providing some context for the upcoming resources.

We would like to quickly acknowledge that the volunteering sector has a demonstrated track-record engaging disabled volunteers, making up approximately [27.6% of the total informal volunteers in Australia](#). It is likely that you and other volunteering organisations already embody a culture of accessibility towards the autistic community.

Yet, there is always room to increase the capacity and confidence between the autistic community and volunteering sector. We have provided practical and easy to implement changes in the upcoming sections that can greatly increase your accessibility to the autistic community

To wrap up your first step in this journey, we have provided a checklist, [Foundations of an Autism Affirming Volunteering Organisation: A Checklist](#). This checklist details four guiding principles and several actions you can take to become a more accessible and inclusive volunteering organisation.

We encourage you to use this checklist as a starting point, or as a reminder, of how you embrace diversity and inclusion.

Here is a brief overview of each principle and how it relates to accessibility and inclusion:

PRINCIPLE	WHAT CAN IT LOOK LIKE?
Communication	An open and explicit dialogue between all members of an organisation, with a willingness to listen and develop a shared understanding with a diverse and unique range of volunteers.
Collaboration	All volunteers working together, using a strengths-based approach to identify suitable roles and tasks and overcome any barriers to engagement.
Commitment	A dedication to ongoing learning and improvement, taking actionable and tangible steps to engage with diverse populations and recognise their unique contribution.
Curiosity	A willingness to take on new perspectives and better understand the lived experience of individuals.

Key Takeaway

- There are a range of **practical and easy-to-implement tools and checklists** in the upcoming resources (Step 2 and 3!)

Foundations of an Autism Affirming Volunteering Organisation: A Checklist

The 4C's (Communication, Commitment, Collaboration and Curiosity) convey an attitude, one that embraces the autistic identity and recognises the unique skills and perspectives they can bring to your volunteering organisation. We believe this can be achieved at an individual or organisational level. Please use this checklist for some actions to get you started on your journey!

AM I READY?	KEY AREA	ACTIONS
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Communicate your commitment to the autistic community and inclusion to all volunteers » Maintain and encourage open and honest dialogue by proactively reaching out and engaging with the autistic community » Use active listening to understand diverse perspectives and promote effective communication
<input type="checkbox"/>	Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Take on opportunities to engage autistic volunteers » Proactively engage with local autism advocacy networks and support services » Actively reflect and develop processes continuously improve upon how to better engage with autistic volunteers » Enact simple changes to your policies and procedures to increase accessibility
<input type="checkbox"/>	Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Acknowledge, understand and recognise the strengths of autistic volunteers » Foster a volunteering culture of respect, trust and mutual support » Engage current autistic volunteers at your organisation and seek feedback
<input type="checkbox"/>	Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Challenge and reflect on your own preconceptions » Approach and seek new situations and volunteers outside of your normal operations » Actively use diverse perspectives to solve problems and create change

External Resources

SPECIFIC RESOURCES	
What is Autism?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Autism Spectrum Australia: How do we describe Autism? » Autism Tasmania: What is Autism? » Amaze: Free online course to understanding autism » Autism Awareness Australia: Understanding Autism
Talking about Autism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Autism CRC: Language Choices and the Autistic Community » Harvard Health: What is Neurodiversity?
Autistic Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Autism Tasmania: Autism Strengths » Embrace Autism: Sensory, Cognitive & Behavioural Strengths in Autism » Spectrum News: Finding Strengths in Autism
Attracting & Engaging Autistic Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Writer Girl: Accessible Language: what it is and why it matters » Academy to Innovate HR: 9 Inspiring Diversity and Inclusion Statement Examples » Volunteering Australia: Diversity and Inclusion Statement
Supportive Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Employment Autism: The Benefits of Buddying » Neurodiversity Hub: Mentoring » Autism CRC: Peer mentoring program for Autistic university students
Communication Styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » May Institute: Seven Tips for communication with Autistic Adults » Autism CRC: Language Choices and the Autistic Community » Autism Tasmania: Social Communication in Autism
Sensory Sensitivities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Autism CRC: Guidelines for Creating Autistic Inclusive Environments » Autism Tasmania: Sensory Differences » Autism Awareness Australia: Sensory Processing
Thinking Preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Autism Tasmania: Information Processing » Autism Awareness Centre: Executive Function: what is it, and how do we support it in those with Autism?

GENERAL RESOURCES	
Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect):	<p>https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/</p> <p>Aspect is Australia's largest autism service providers. Their website offers a wealth of resources, guides, and training materials specifically tailored to support organisations in creating inclusive environments for autistic individuals. There is also a multitude of resources covering each stage of develop for an individual with autism.</p>
Autism Awareness Australia	<p>https://www.autismawareness.com.au/</p> <p>Autism Awareness Australia is a national organisation dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding of autism. Their website provides resources and information for organisations seeking to support autistic individuals and raise awareness of the nature of autism and increasing accessibility and a large-scale.</p>
Autism CRC	<p>https://www.autismcrc.com.au/</p> <p>The Autism Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) is a collaboration of researchers, industry partners, and autistic individuals in Australia. Their website offers research findings, practical resources, and training materials to support organisations in creating inclusive environments for autistic individuals.</p>
Australian Network on Disability (AND)	<p>https://www.and.org.au/</p> <p>AND is an organization that promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace. Their website provides resources, guides, and training programs that can help organisations effectively support and accommodate the autistic community.</p>
Autism Queensland:	<p>https://autismqld.com.au/</p> <p>Autism Queensland is a state-based organization providing support and resources for individuals with autism and their families. Their website offers resources and training programs to assist organisations in creating inclusive environments for autistic volunteers.</p>

GENERAL RESOURCES	
Amaze:	<p>https://www.amaze.org.au/</p> <p>Amaze is the peak body for autism in Victoria, Australia. Their website provides resources, toolkits, and training programs to assist organisations in supporting autistic individuals in a variety of settings.</p>
Empower Autism	<p>https://empowerautism.org.au/</p> <p>Empower Autism is a well-established, not-for-profit organisation that provides information, support and capacity development services to autistic people, together with their parents, carers and families. We are strong advocates of the benefits of peer led support and we value the active participation of those with lived experience of autism.</p>
Yellow Ladybugs	<p>https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/</p> <p>Yellow Ladybugs is a non-profit organization that supports and empowers autistic girls and women in Australia. They offer mentorship programs, social events, workshops, and resources to promote self-acceptance and understanding.</p>
Autism Connect	<p>https://www.autismconnect.org.au/</p> <p>Autism Connect is an online directory and resource hub that connects individuals with autism, their families, and professionals to relevant support services and resources across Australia.</p>
Autism Advocacy Australia (A4)	<p>https://a4.org.au/</p> <p>A4 is an advocacy organization that promotes the rights and interests of individuals with autism and Asperger's syndrome. They provide information, resources, and advocacy support to ensure individuals with autism are included and supported in all aspects of life.</p>

Common Autism Related Terms: A Glossary

This glossary contains autism-specific terms to help promote a shared understanding with the autistic community.

It's important to acknowledge that language is dynamic, and this list is not set in concrete. Be mindful of individual preferences when using any of the language contained in this glossary.

TERM	DEFINITION
Autism	A neurodevelopmental condition that is characterised by a range of unique characteristics in communication, interests and routines, sensory processing and executive functioning.
Autism-adjacent	A term used to describe individuals who do not have an autism diagnosis but share common values and experiences with autistic individuals.
Communication Styles	Common ways in which autistic individuals may express themselves or interact with others.
Executive Functioning	A set of thinking processes that are involved in planning, organising, initiating, and completing tasks. These processes help with organising our environments, thoughts and actions. Differences in executive functioning are commonly experienced by individuals with autism and other neurodivergent conditions.
Identity first vs Person first language	Refers to the way in which a person's condition or disability is referred to in language. Identity first language prioritises the person's identity as an autistic or neurodivergent person, while person first language prioritises the person over their condition.
Masking	The act of hiding or suppressing one's autistic traits or behaviours in order to fit in with non-autistic social norms. Masking can be mentally and emotionally exhausting for autistic individuals.
Neurodevelopmental Condition	A condition that affects the development of the nervous system and brain, such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia.
Neurodivergent	Refers to individuals who have neurological differences, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other conditions.
Neurodiversity	The idea that neurological differences should be recognised and respected as a natural part of human diversity. Different ways of thinking, learning and behaving are treated with respect and not seen as deficits.

TERM	DEFINITION
Neurotypical	Refers to individuals whose neurological development and function are within the typical range.
Reasonable Adjustments	Modifications or accommodations that are made to enable individuals with disabilities to participate fully in society, such as making changes to the physical or sensory environments.
Sensory Sensitivities	The different ways in which individuals process sensory information, such as touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight. Autistic individuals may have sensory processing differences throughout their daily lives.
Social Model of Disability	A model of disability that emphasises the role of societal barriers and attitudes in limiting the participation and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, rather than focusing on the individual's impairment or difference.
Strengths-Based Approach	An approach that focuses on identifying and building upon an individual's strengths and abilities, rather than focusing solely on their deficits or challenges.
Stimming	Stimming is the colloquial term for self-stimulatory behaviour. Some autistic individuals stim to regulate sensory input, express excitement, and cope with stress or anxiety. Common stims include rocking, flapping, or repeating words or phrases.