

AUTISM FOUNDATIONS · 2.9

Autism and Identity-First Language: Why Most Autistic Adults Prefer It

Most autistic adults prefer identity-first language: 'autistic person', not 'person with autism'. This summary explains the survey evidence, why the preference is what it is, and when context still calls for person-first.

FOR

Adults and parents

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

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What the survey evidence says

- **A clear preference among autistic adults.** UK and international surveys consistently show that autistic adults prefer 'autistic' and 'autistic person' over 'person with autism' when describing themselves.
- **'ASD' and 'autism spectrum disorder' are widely disliked.** The word 'disorder' is the main objection. Where clinical precision is needed, the term is used; in everyday writing, 'autism' or 'autistic' is preferred.
- **Parents and professionals are more mixed.** Some parents prefer person-first language for their own children. Professionals were trained in person-first and have been slower to shift.

Why most autistic adults prefer it

- **Autism is part of who someone is.** Identity-first language reflects this. Many autistic adults do not experience autism as a separable condition added on to a person.
- **Person-first language was built for deficit framings.** It was developed for conditions framed as illnesses to be cured. Many autistic adults reject that framing for themselves.
- **Identity-first has been a deliberate community choice.** It has been articulated in autistic self-advocacy writing since the late 1990s. Major peer-reviewed journals have followed in recent years.
- **Other language has shifted too.** 'Suffers from autism' and 'afflicted with' are pathologising framings that do not match autistic experience. 'Features' is increasingly used instead of 'symptoms'. 'Co-occurring' is preferred over 'co-morbid'.

How we apply this

- **Identity-first as our default.** In our clinical documentation and patient-facing writing, we use identity-first language for autistic adults and adults under assessment.
- **Individual preference always wins.** If a patient prefers person-first, we use person-first. The community default does not override an individual choice.
- **Family preference for children.** Where parents prefer person-first for their own child, we follow that, with a gentle nod toward identity-first as the wider community direction as the child grows.
- **Be wary of services that only use deficit language.** Exclusive use of pathologising language is increasingly out of step with current clinical and community standards.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

If autism has been on your mind for yourself or your child, NHS routes start with GP referral. NeuroFX offers private autism assessment for adults and children from our Bedford clinic. Seek same-day help via 111 (or 999 in an emergency) for any mental health crisis.

SOURCES

Kenny et al. 2016 (Autism); Bottema-Beutel et al. 2021 (Autism in Adulthood); Taboas et al. 2023; Sinclair 1999

NEXT STEPS

Speak to NeuroFX

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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