



IRELAND'S AUTISM CHARITY



The Hospital
Saturday Fund®

Understanding your Child's Autism Diagnosis

For Parents and Guardians



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What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference.

Autism is a recognised disability and can be considered an invisible disability, meaning that there are no visible differences that are noticeable to another person.

An Autistic person may experience differences in how they communicate, interact with others, learn and experience the world around them.

Autism and Neurodiversity

Autism is part of the **neurodivergent** family.

This includes differences such as **ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Epilepsy, Tourette's Syndrome, and Dyscalculia**.

These are all different **neurotypes**, meaning different ways of thinking and processing the world.

People with these differences are **neurodivergent**.

People without these differences are **neurotypical**.

People are **born Autistic**, however this is not always known at birth.



How Autism is Identified

As a child grows, they may:

- Communicate differently from others.
- Parents may notice their child is experiencing differences in speech development.
- Find everyday situations or change stressful or overwhelming.
- Need routine and structure to cope.
- Have co-occurring diagnosis such as dyslexia, dyspraxia.
- Some individuals may not show any of these indicators and difficulties may not be noticed until they are in primary school, nearing puberty or approaching young adulthood.

These differences may lead to an **Autism diagnosis**.



My Child Received their Autism Diagnosis, What's Next?

Receiving an Autism diagnosis can feel overwhelming, there can be a lot of information to take in. It is important to take your time with this information as you process it. There is no rush, no perfect path, and no expectation to have everything figured out right away. Learning and adjusting is a journey for every family and individual.



Take It Step by Step

- You are your child's strongest advocate, but don't put pressure on yourself.
- Make a simple list of next steps and work through these steps at your own pace.
- Connecting with local or online parent support groups can be very helpful.
- Linking in with the services and supports we offer in AsIAM can also be helpful at the start of your Autistic child's journey.

Learn About Autism – From Autistic Voices

- Learn about autism through Autistic-led resources, books, videos, podcasts and reliable social media platforms. It is important to check the authenticity of these platforms.
- Listening to Autistic people's lived experiences helps build understanding.

Understanding the Diagnosis

- You will receive a report following the Autism assessment which outlines the recommended or essential supports for your child, such as:
 - Speech and language therapy
 - Occupational therapy
 - Psychological support
 - Educational supports
- **Focus on strengths, as Autistic people often have many strengths, including:**
 - Strong focus and attention to detail
 - Passion for interests/ Special interests
 - Honesty and loyalty
 - Creativity and original thinking
 - Empathy and compassion
 - Strong sense of right and wrong
- Focusing on strengths and interests can help Autistic children build skills and confidence.
- Remember that your child has not changed as a result of their diagnosis. They are the same child they were before diagnosis.
- The diagnosis provides understanding, not limits.
- Autism is a difference in how someone thinks and experiences the world. It is not something negative or wrong.



Common Characteristics of Autism

Characteristics vary widely between individuals; this list is not exhaustive.

Autistic communication differences

- Communication preferences and styles may differ from non-Autistic people.
- May be speaking or non-speaking.
- May need extra time to process and understand spoken language.
- May use words differently or understand vocabulary in a unique way.
- May find it difficult to find the right words in certain situations or with certain people.
- May interpret phrases or idioms literally.
- May understand jokes differently or have a different sense of humour.
- May have differences in expressing frustration, anxiety, distress, or emotional dysregulation, and may communicate these in alternative ways.
- Speech may differ in tone, accent, speed, or volume.
- May use echolalia (repeating words or phrases).
- May show limited facial expression or a flat affect despite experiencing strong emotions.
- May miss or interpret differently facial expressions and other non-verbal social cues.



How do I tell my child they're Autistic?

As a parent, you want to protect your child from feeling overwhelmed or distressed. It's natural to worry that telling your child they are Autistic might "label" them or have a negative impact. However, research shows that children who understand they are Autistic often experience better mental wellbeing.

Many Autistic adults who were diagnosed later in life say they always knew they had differences, but they just didn't have a name for it. Most describe feeling relief and positivity once they understood their autism and wish they had known earlier.

When and How to Talk About Autism

There is no single "right" way to tell your child they are Autistic. How you talk about autism should be guided by your child's age, understanding, and individual needs.

- Start the conversation as early as possible.
- Introduce autism gradually, using simple and positive language.
- Build understanding over time rather than through one big conversation.

How to Explain Autism

- Talk about neurodiversity which means that everyone's brain works differently.
- Explain that being Autistic describes how your child's brain works, how they communicate, and how they experience the world.
- Highlight what makes your child unique and special.

Keep It Positive and Open

- Speak positively about autism and show your child that many Autistic people share similar experiences.
- Normalise differences at home as difference is part of everyday life.
- Let your child know that the world is richer, more creative, and more inclusive because of different ways of thinking.

Why This Matters

Open, positive conversations about autism can:

- Support your child's self-understanding
- Improve confidence and well-being
- Help your child feel accepted and valued



Normalising an autism diagnosis helps create a supportive and accepting environment where your child can grow with confidence in who they are. There are many child friendly books, resources, and videos available to help children understand Autism.

Autism and Co-Occurring Differences and Disabilities?

Autistic people often have co-occurring differences or disabilities alongside their autism diagnosis/identity. This is very common and not unusual.

Common Co-Occurring Differences may include:

- ADHD
- Dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder)
- Dyslexia
- Epilepsy
- Learning or intellectual disabilities
- Physical disabilities



Autistic people may also experience co-occurring mental health conditions, such as:

- Anxiety
- Mood disorders
- Eating disorders
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Some individuals may have more than one co-occurring difference or disability.

Identifying Co-Occurring Needs

Assessments, such as occupational therapy assessments, can help identify additional needs like dyspraxia or sensory differences. As awareness grows, it is becoming more common for people to receive more than one diagnosis, helping them better understand themselves and access appropriate supports.

Accessing Support in Ireland

In Ireland, accessing support can be challenging for Autistic people with co-occurring mental health conditions. This is because Disability Services and Mental Health Services are separate, meaning children may need to attend different teams for different supports.

There can also be a lack of professional awareness around how mental health conditions present in Autistic people. In some cases, effective support requires specialist autism-informed knowledge, such as when supporting Autistic individuals with eating disorders.

Having co-occurring differences does not change who your child is. It helps explain their experiences and highlights the supports they may need. Understanding and recognising co-occurring conditions can lead to better, more appropriate care and support.

Communication Supports - Advice from a Speech and Language Therapist

Speech, Language and communication

- These terms describe how a person shares and receives information.
- Communication can include speaking, writing, drawing, signing, gestures, or using communication devices.
- Autistic differences in communication are present from birth but may become more noticeable as a child grows.
- Not all Autistic individuals have differences in every area of communication.
- Communication needs vary greatly from person to person.

Language development differences

- Autistic children may follow different developmental paths toward using speech, words, or signs.
- Some Autistic people are non-speaking or partially-speaking and use alternative communication (such as Augmentative and Alternative Communication devices, visuals, signs, or a combination).
- Alternative communication: communication without spoken words.
- Augmentative communication: spoken language supported by devices, visuals, or sign language.

Patterns of language development

- Some Autistic children may appear quiet in early childhood and then experience a sudden increase in spoken language later.
- Some Autistic individuals are early talkers with advanced vocabulary for their age.
- Remaining non-speaking is valid, and spoken language is not required for effective communication.

Communication supports

- Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) can provide guidance and support tailored to the individual.
- Society can support Autistic people by accepting and valuing different communication styles.

Unique language features

- Echolalia: repeating words or phrases, either immediately or after a delay.
- Neologisms: made-up words used to represent real concepts (e.g. "hot rain" meaning steam).



Sensory Processing - Advice from an Occupational Therapist

Our bodies have 8 senses that help us understand what is happening inside and outside our bodies.

External senses:

- Sight (visual)
- Hearing (auditory)
- Taste (gustatory)
- Smell (olfactory)
- Touch (tactile)



Internal senses:

- Vestibular – movement and balance
- Proprioception – body position and movement
- Interoception – awareness of body signals (e.g. hunger, heartbeat, needing the bathroom)

What Is Sensory Processing?

Sensory processing is how the brain receives, sorts, and responds to information from the senses. Because we receive a lot of sensory information at once, the brain filters what is important so we can focus.

Autistic children may process sensory information differently. This can mean they receive too much or too little sensory input, making certain environments challenging. For example, busy or noisy spaces may feel overwhelming and lead to reactions such as covering ears, becoming upset, or needing to leave the space.

Sensory Regulation and “Stimming”

Everyone uses sensory strategies to stay calm, alert, and focused. Autistic people may need more frequent or stronger strategies.

Autistic children often use stimming (self-stimulatory movements) to regulate their sensory systems. Common stims include:

- Rocking
- Hand flapping
- Running back and forth
- Making sounds

Stimming helps the child manage sensory input. If it is not harmful or distressing, it should be allowed and respected.

Sensory Profile

A Sensory Profile describes a child's sensory preferences, sensitivities, and regulation strategies. Occupational Therapists gather this information through questionnaires and parent discussions. Sensory needs can change depending on anxiety levels and environments.

Sensory Strategies

An Occupational Therapist can help identify:

- Early signs of sensory overload
- Tools and strategies to support regulation

Strategies may include:

- Physical (e.g. ear defenders, fidgets)
- Cognitive (e.g. preparation or visual supports)
- Environmental (e.g. lighting, noise, space)

The goal is to either calm or alert the nervous system, depending on the child's needs. Many children already use effective strategies and may not need additional support.



Executive Functioning

Executive functioning includes skills such as planning, starting tasks, remembering steps, and switching between activities. Many Autistic children need extra support with these skills.

Examples of Sensory Supports include:

- **Calming strategies:**
 - Slow movement (rocking, swinging)
 - Deep pressure (massage, weighted blanket)
 - Quiet spaces
 - Soft lighting
 - Slow music
- **Alerting strategies:**
 - Movement (jumping, bouncing etc)
 - Cold drinks
 - Chewing gum
 - Fidget tools
 - Bright colours or faster music



Autism and Mental Health - Advice from a Psychologist

Autism and mental health

- Autistic children often experience higher levels of anxiety than non-Autistic children.
- Anxiety commonly stems from environments that are not autism-friendly.
- Contributing factors can include lack of understanding from others, uncertainty, and pressure to mask Autistic traits.

Reducing anxiety through environmental support

- Educate people in the child's life that Autistic behaviours are valid.
- Surround the child with accepting and understanding people.
- Allow and support stimming (movement or sounds) as a natural regulation strategy.
- Understand the child's sensory profile and adapt environments where possible (e.g. reduce noise, lighting).
- Advocate for sensory-friendly or relaxation spaces in schools and public places.
- Create a calming or safe sensory space at home with preferred sensory supports and activities.

When environments cannot be changed

- Build in movement breaks or quiet time during the day.
- Balance energy use by pairing demanding activities with enjoyable or regulating ones.
- Learn and plan for anxiety triggers (e.g. preparing a calm space after school).
- Reduce sensory input (e.g. noise-cancelling headphones, comfortable clothing).
- Maintain predictability and prepare the child in advance for changes.

Supporting anxiety at home

- Help children understand emotions through books, videos, and gentle labelling of feelings.
- Gradually encourage children to identify or choose how they are feeling.
- Some children benefit from breathing or relaxation exercises, though these may take practice.
- Many strategies used to support Autistic needs also reduce anxiety.



Understanding meltdowns

- A meltdown is a stress or anxiety response to an overwhelming experience.
- Learning about meltdowns from Autistic perspectives can help parents respond effectively.
- Preventing meltdowns by reducing anxiety and triggers is the most effective approach.

Responding during a meltdown

- Stay calm and allow the child time to process.
- Understand that behaviour during a meltdown is not intentional.
- Avoid reacting with anger or agitation, as this can increase anxiety.
- Respect whether the child prefers closeness or space.
- Use soothing strategies that suit the child (e.g. low light, quiet, deep pressure).

After a meltdown

- Reflect on patterns, triggers, and what helped or didn't help.
- Treat meltdowns as learning opportunities.
- When calm, involve the child in discussing what might help in the future.
- Small, consistent changes can lead to meaningful improvements over time.



What support is available to my child after receiving an Autism Diagnosis?

Support after an autism diagnosis

- Support needs are individual and person-dependent.
- Autism itself does not need to be treated or nor can it be cured; support should address specific challenges or barriers.
- Supports focus on helping the child meet goals and improve daily life, not changing who they are.

Types of professional support

- Speech and Language Therapist (SLT): supports communication difficulties in specific situations.
- Occupational Therapist (OT): helps with sensory processing differences, anxiety, distress, and daily living skills.
- Psychologist or psychotherapist: supports mental health needs such as anxiety (with autism-informed practice).
- Services may be accessed through public or private systems.

Role of parents and caregivers

- Accept and understand the child as they are.
- Recognise current support needs and advocate for appropriate help.
- Trust parental instincts when making decisions.



Choosing safe and appropriate therapies

- No therapy should aim to “fix,” “cure,” or make a child “less Autistic.”
- Be cautious of non-evidence-based or harmful treatments.
- Therapy goals should focus on wellbeing, happiness, engagement, and self-acceptance.
- Avoid approaches that aim to make a child behave more “typically.”

Evaluating therapies and providers

- Choose accredited, qualified professionals who follow modern understandings of autism.
- Ask about the therapist’s experience with Autistic people and the models they use.
- Check professional registration and governing bodies (e.g. PSI, IACP, IASLT, AOTI, CORU).
- Seek feedback from the Autistic community, especially Autistic adults with lived experience.
- Remember that even evidence-based therapies may not suit every child.

Key principle

- The child’s wellbeing and identity as an Autistic person should always be the priority.

Supports Available

Community support groups

- Provide parents with support, information, guidance, and shared lived experiences.
- Help families navigate local services, professionals, education supports, and training opportunities.
- Offer emotional support and a space to talk about parental experiences and feelings.
- Reduce isolation and uncertainty following a diagnosis.
- Support groups can advise on financial entitlements, education pathways, and accessing state services.
- Provide social opportunities for Autistic children to meet peers.
- Availability of groups and activities varies by location.
- Local groups can be accessed via the AsIAM Autism Information Line (0818 234 234) or go to <https://asiam.ie/who-we-are/infoline>.

Financial supports

- An autism diagnosis does not automatically guarantee financial support.
- Eligibility depends on the impact of disability and, in some cases, means testing.

Key Financial Supports

- **Disability Allowance:** Means-tested payment for people aged 16–65 with substantial work restrictions; may include additional benefits.
- **Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA):** Monthly, non-means-tested payment for children with significant care needs; includes entitlement to a medical card.
- **Carers' Allowance:** Means-tested payment for full-time carers; may include free travel and household benefits.
- **Medical Card Scheme:** Provides free access to healthcare and supports such as AAC devices, wheelchairs, and other assistive aids.
- **Incapacitated Child Tax Credit:** For parents/guardians of a permanently incapacitated child.
- **Home Carer Tax Credit:** Tax credit for families where one partner provides full-time care.
- **VAT Refunds:** Refunds on assistive aids, appliances, and certain home adaptations.
- **Housing Adaptation Grant:** Supports home modifications for people with disabilities.
- **Free Nappy Scheme:** Available for children aged 3+ who are not toilet trained.

AsIAM – National Autism Charity (Ireland)

- Advocates for an inclusive, accessible, and autism-affirming society.
- Provides information, guidance, and signposting through a full-time support service.
- Runs family support programmes with online and in-person events for Autistic children and families.
- Community Support Services which provide in-person advice sessions and groups for Autistic children, teens and adults. Support groups and education supports are also available to parents to avail of.
- Delivers education and training to schools, workplaces, and organisations.
- Offers adult support and employment programmes.
- Provides an Autism ID Card.
- Engages in policy advocacy to improve services and supports nationwide.

Education and employment supports

- Organisations support access to education, training, and employment for Autistic people (e.g. AHEAD, SOLAS, Specialisterne Ireland, Open Doors Initiative).

Advocacy and support organisations

- National charities and organisations support autism, ADHD, learning differences, disability rights, carers, and independent living.
- Self-advocacy groups and inclusion-focused organisations are key sources of guidance and empowerment.

Professional bodies

- Accredited organisations regulate and guide professionals such as psychologists, therapists, counsellors, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists.

State agencies

- Public services include CAMHS, NEPS, Primary Care Therapy Services, and Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs).



Educational Supports for Autistic Students in Ireland

Educational Supports for Autistic Students

Autistic children can access a range of educational supports from early years through post-primary education. Supports are based on a child's individual strengths and needs.

Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE)

Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) – Age 3+

The ECCE Scheme provides 2 free years of preschool (3 hours per day, 5 days per week).

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) supports children with additional needs to attend mainstream early years settings.

- AIM offers 7 levels of support, based on the child and setting's needs
- A diagnosis is not required
- Supports may include advice, training, equipment, or extra staff
- AIM is child-centred and inclusive

More information: aim.gov.ie



Home Tuition (Early Years)

The Home Tuition Scheme provides early educational support where no suitable preschool place is available.

- Ages 2–3: 10 hours per week
- Age 3+: 20 hours per week
- Available while awaiting placement or where attendance is not possible

Applications are made through the Department of Education.



Early Intervention

Early intervention classes are specialised educational programs for young children (birth to around age 5) with developmental delays or disabilities.

They focus on key developmental areas, including:

- Communication
- Motor skills
- Social interaction
- Cognitive development

These programs take place during the critical early years of growth, when support can have the greatest impact.

Classes are individualised to each child's needs, ensuring tailored support.

They may include:

- Speech therapy
- Physical therapy
- Play-based learning activities



Early intervention involves working closely with families, supporting parents and caregivers in helping their child at home.

The main goal is to address challenges early and support development effectively.

This early support helps improve long-term outcomes, including readiness for school and everyday life skills.

How to access early intervention classes

- Speak to your **GP or Public Health Nurse**, who can refer your child for assessment of need.
- Apply for an Assessment of Need through the Health Service Executive (HSE).
- Once assessed, children may be referred to local **Early Intervention Teams** or preschool supports.
- Access can also be through **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** settings with additional supports.
- In some cases, families may choose to access **private therapies or early intervention services**, depending on availability and waiting lists.



Primary & Post-Primary School Supports

Continuum of Support

Schools support students through three levels:

1. Classroom Support (Support for All)

- Provided by the classroom teacher
- Strategies used within the whole class
- A Student Support Plan may be developed

2. School Support (Support for Some)

- Led by a Special Education Teacher (SET)
- Individual or small-group support
- Specific learning or regulation targets set

3. School Support Plus (Support for Few)

- Involves external professionals (e.g. psychologists, OTs, SLTs)
- Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Student Support File developed
- Parents and, where appropriate, the child are involved

Support plans are reviewed regularly, and students remain entitled to all lower levels of support alongside higher ones.



Autism Classes (Mainstream Schools)

- A formal Autism diagnosis is required to access an Autism class
- Small class sizes (usually up to 6 students)
- Students may split time between autism class and mainstream class
- All students are entitled to integration with peers

Special Educational Needs Officer (SENO)

- Each area has a dedicated Special Educational Needs Officer (SENO). You can contact your child's SENO for guidance on placements.
- You can find your local SENO through the National Council for Special Education (NCSE Website).

Special Schools

Some children with higher support needs may attend a special school.

- May be autism-specific or for general intellectual disability
- Smaller classes and higher staff ratios
- Access to on-site therapies and specialist facilities
- Tailored curriculum and close progress monitoring



Special Needs Assistant (SNA)

SNAs support students with care needs (e.g. safety, toileting, supervision).

- SNAs are assigned to the school, not individual students
- An autism diagnosis is not required to access an SNA
- Schools apply for SNA support based on student needs and are allocated a certain number of roles
- Diagnostic Reports (if available), help guide support planning

Special Needs Assistant (SNA)

Provides additional support during the summer for children with extra needs.

Includes:

- School-based summer programmes
- Home-based provision for high-need students
- Literacy and numeracy camps in DEIS schools



School Transport

Children attending their nearest special school or autism class may be eligible for school transport.

How do I apply?

The NCSE processes applications for school transport for students with special educational needs. Completed application forms should be submitted to your SENO along with the professional report(s) supporting the application. Applications are forwarded by the SENO with the support of the school principal to the School Transport Section in the Department of Education, who make the decision on all applications. The SENO will link in with you to update you on any progress and decisions made regarding your application.



Supporting my child's siblings

Supporting siblings of an Autistic child

- Balancing the needs of an Autistic child and their siblings can be challenging.
- Parents may spend significant time advocating for their Autistic child, which can affect attention given to other children.
- Non-Autistic siblings may sometimes feel overlooked or left out and may need additional support.

Practical ways to support siblings

- Encourage siblings to develop their own interests and activities outside the home.
- Recognise and celebrate their achievements and successes.
- Set aside regular one-to-one "special time" with each child to do something they enjoy.
- Praise and acknowledge kindness, patience, and acceptance shown towards their Autistic sibling.
- Be aware that siblings may take on a "mini-parent" role and feel increased responsibility or worry.

Emotional support for siblings

- Let siblings know it is okay to talk about their feelings, worries, or frustrations.
- If sibling stress or responsibility becomes overwhelming, seek professional support (e.g. GP, local services).
- Consider sibling support groups if available in the community.

Helping siblings understand autism

- Explain autism in an age-appropriate way, focusing on differences and preferences rather than deficits.
- Help siblings understand why family routines or experiences may differ from others.
- These conversations can build empathy, understanding, and acceptance within the family.

Supporting siblings of an Autistic child

- Children's books can support understanding of autism, including:
 - Autism in My Family – Sandra Tucker
 - What Autism Can Be Like – Sue Adams
 - Y'know That Kid? – Noeleen Smith
 - The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide – Yenn Purkis & Tanya Masterman
 - Amazing me, Amazing You – Christine McGuinness
 - I'm Autistic and that's ok! – Coastal Empath
 - Wonderfully Wired Brains – Louise Gooding
 - Being Autistic (and what that actually means) – Niamh Garvey



Child Friendly Resources

Video Resources



[Alexander Amelines; 'Amazing Things Happen'](#)



[AsIAm; 'I Can Communicate!'](#)



[AsIAm; 'That's My Voice!'](#)



[AsIAm; 'Learn My Language'](#)



[AsIAm; 'Remember I Can Hear You'](#)

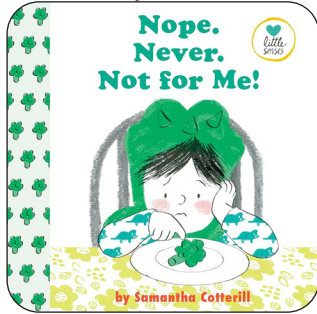


[AsIAm; 'I Like Options Too'](#)



[AsIAm; 'Don't Judge Me'](#)

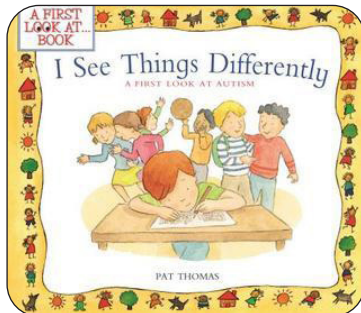
Story Books / Short Novels:



'Nope. Never. Not For Me!'

By Samantha Cotterill

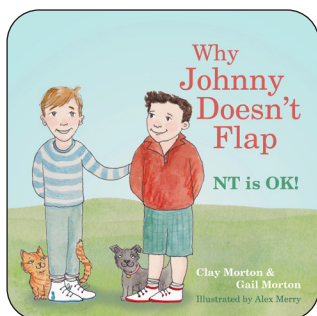
A storybook for younger readers exploring sensory issues with food/taste.



'I See Things Differently'

By Pat Thomas

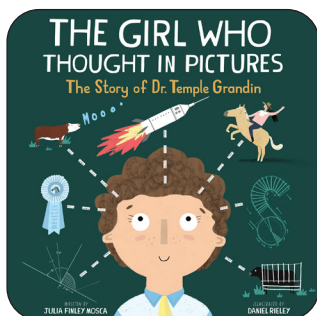
A picture-book to help neurotypical children understand autism.



'Why Johnny Doesn't Flap'

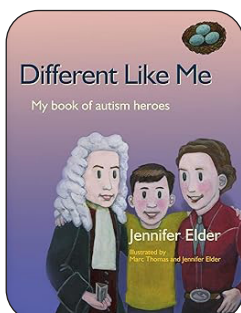
By Clay & Gail Morton. Alex Merry, Jessica Kingsley

A storybook for younger Autistic readers explaining why neurotypical people act the way they do.



'The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin'

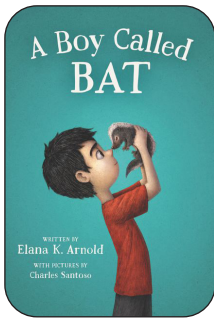
By Julia Finley Mosca, Daniel Rieley
An illustrated picture book telling the story of Temple Grandin's achievements, not in spite of her autism, but because of it.



'Different Like Me: My Book of Autism Heroes'

By Jennifer Elder, Marc Thomas, Jessica Kingsley

An illustrated picture book about people on the spectrum who achieved great things, but experienced challenges socially.



'A Boy Called Bat'

By Elana K. Arnold, Charles Santoso, Harper Colins

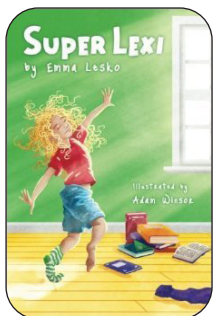
A short novel about an Autistic boy and his friendship with a pet skunk.



'Forever Neverland'

By Susan Adrian

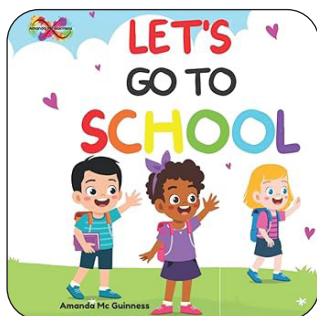
A short novel about an Autistic boy who gets to go to Neverland.



'Super Lexi'

By Emma Lesko, Adam Windsor

A short novel about autism, anxiety and school. (7+)



'Let's Go To School'

By Amanda Mc Guinness

A story created for Neurodivergent children going to school for the first time.

Available on: Lets Go To School - Cogs The Brain Shop



Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Jessica Kingsley Publishers has an autism specific section on their website with books for children of all ages.

<http://www.jkp.com/jkpblog/category/autism>



IRELAND'S **AUTISM** CHARITY



The Hospital
Saturday Fund®

Same Chance
As I Live, Work, Grow, Participate

Registered Charity Number: 20144838