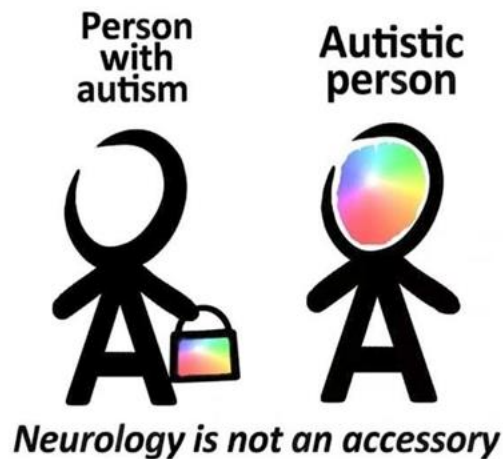


MODULE 1

Module 1 seeks to help you understand Autism, not from a diagnostic viewpoint but more from an experiential position. In order to help you understand why autistic children find social interaction so stressful as well as build relationships and facilitate learning, we use the following analogies and metaphors to help understand Autism.

Terminology – What We Say Matters!

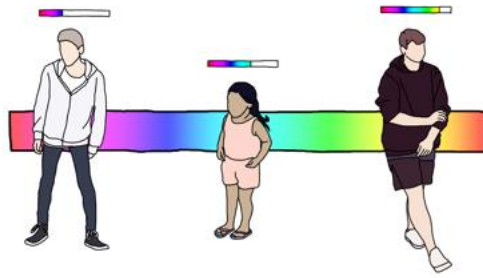
- Autistic-guided language preferences
- **Respect for autistic people's preferences, and the diversity of autistic people**



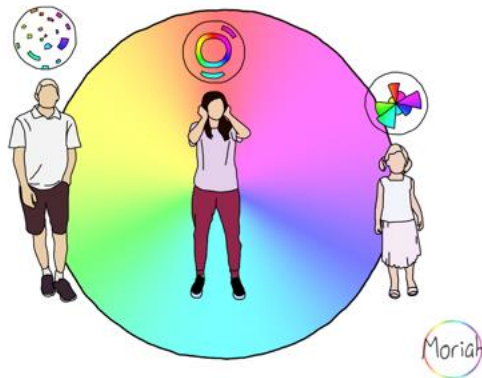
Autism NZ recognises the importance of autistic-guided language. Language is constantly evolving, and many terms used in the past to describe autism have been largely rejected by the autistic community.

It is most important to use and respect each person's preferred terminology. Ask what the person prefers however when speaking more generally about autism listening to the preferences of the autistic community, this means using identity-first language for autism (e.g. an autistic individual, autistic people) instead of person-first language (e.g. a person with autism, people who have autism).

Autism as a Diverse Non-Linear Spectrum



- What people think the autism spectrum looks like



- What it can actually look like

The autism spectrum is a diverse mix of traits which can come with both strengths and challenges.

The autistic community prefers that an individual's specific support needs are described when needed. Rather than reducing their support needs into categories of functioning (high-functioning, low-functioning) or categories of severity (mild autism, severe autism).

If simplification is required:

- Person with less obvious support needs or person with lower support needs.
- Person with complex support needs or person with higher support needs.

However, we shouldn't simply replace the terms of high-functioning or mild autism with less obvious support needs or lower support needs, nor it is appropriate to simply replace the terms of low-functioning or severe autism with complex support needs or higher support needs.

This is because functioning and severity labels do not represent the autistic persons experience of being autistic – they represent how society experiences autistic people.

The different domains on the autism spectrum colour wheel can vary but often include language, executive functioning, perception, sensory, and motor skills, and may include emotional sensitivity, focused interests, social skills, and stimming.

In general, the closer to the outside of the circle in a particular domain, the less of a challenge that area may be for the individual (and often this represents a strength or an area the individual excels at), and the closer to the inner circle in

a particular domain, the more of a challenge that individual may have in that domain it is may be an area that the individual requires support with. Importantly, the spectrum isn't fixed, it is fluid across domains and contexts. A person's strengths, challenges, and support needs can change with time, in different situations, and in different environments.

The Bridge

During the *Way to Play* programme, we use the analogy of crossing the bridge to show that it is the responsibility of non-autistic people to make the effort to meet the autistic child on their terms, to build relationships and facilitate learning.

Crossing the Bridge



Imagine autistic people being on one side of a bridge in their predictable world. On the other side of the bridge are non-autistic people, being perfectly happy in a fluid, dynamic, changeable, unpredictable world. As parents/whānau, carers and professionals, we want to show autistic individuals how much our unpredictable world has to offer them and to include them in it.

Too often autistic children are told to get themselves over to the other side of the bridge. If only it were that easy! But the great news is that non-autistic people find it easy to adapt and change. We have crossed many bridges before! So let us cross the bridge to where the autistic child is comfortable and become their guide to the world on the other side. Let us walk hand in hand, one step at a time, across the bridge. Our aim is to go as far across the bridge as we can together, not to eliminate autism obviously, but to provide joyous, new experiences.

Autism NZ See saw

Where does 'play' sit on the see saw?

Social interaction is one of the key areas that many autistic people find challenging. For young children, this means that they often find playing with others difficult. As a result, when parents/ whānau, caregivers and early childhood teachers try to play with the child, they may feel rejected.

Such rejection can strip the adult of their confidence and make them more reluctant to try to play again.

Why is play so challenging for our autistic children and where does 'play' sit on the see saw? click here for an explanation: <https://youtu.be/Akfc3NuCZs>

Not knowing why the child appears to not want to play with us makes us feel even more helpless. *Way to Play* uses the metaphor of a dark alley to help explain why the child reacts like this.

The Dark Alley

Let us imagine you are walking alone down the road in an unfamiliar town. It is dark and you cannot recognise any landmarks. Up ahead you see a man you do not know. He is waving to you and calling out "Come down this dark alley with me - it's going to be fun!" Would you go??



"Come down this dark alley with me"

You probably would not go, would you? You would probably be scared and anxious. You might stop and think twice before walking towards him. You might even turn and run in the other direction.

Often autistic children find themselves in this situation. They are approached by adults who want them to interact, want them to play and have fun times together. Just like you in the dark alley, the children cannot see what will happen. They are anxious because we adults are so unpredictable, everything is happening quickly with no time for them to think.

Autistic children fear such unpredictability, scared of spontaneity, and would far rather do the things that they know and have done before.

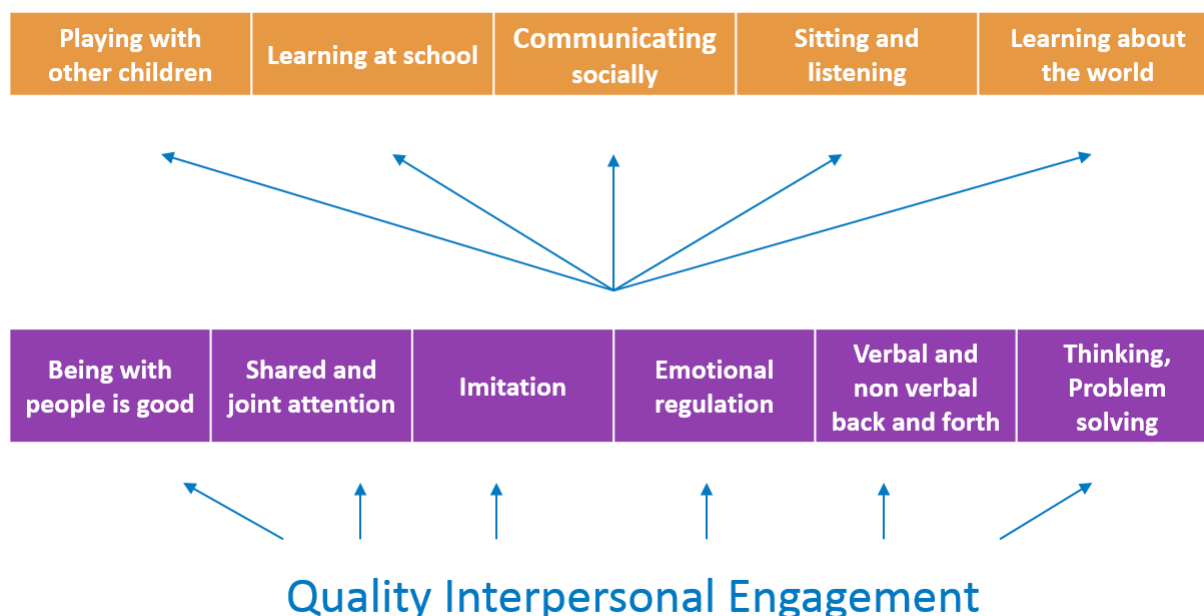
In module 4 we recap the *Way to Play* strategies. One of them being pattern, memory and variation. This is the start of you becoming the trusted person to guide your child over the bridge and through the dark alley. The aim is to guide your child into more dynamic 'changeable' situations. The 'pattern, memory and variation' strategies are our first tools to help you do this, and the basis for all our play interactions in *Way to Play*.

What is the child learning?

The main aim for *Way to Play* is to increase your child's ability to develop the fundamentals of communicating, relating and thinking, while you are having fun playing together.

It is widely believed that the development of these skills is crucial for later learning, and that focussing on them will facilitate learning and competence in other areas of functioning as the child grows.

Some of the key targets are as follows:



Sometimes it is easy to get bogged down in too many targets and working towards single goals, but when play is happening there are often many targets being met at the same time.

To help you assess how your child is doing, we have grouped the targets together in stages in the following target chart (reading from the bottom up).

Use this chart to record your child's development and work out which skills you need to focus on next. You might notice that your child is already doing some of the skills. Tick off skills as your child masters them, and work on any skills at a lower level that they have not.

We notice that children rarely operate on only one level at a time, and they often move between the levels. So do not become concerned if your child does not reach the targets in the order they are shown.

