



Asynchronous development in Autistic youth

A guide for parents and carers



Autistic young people often develop skills at a different rate to others their age, and this can look quite different from one young person to the next. When a young person's strengths and needs are not well understood, or when expectations and responsibilities don't match where they are actually at, it can be a source of real stress for both young people and their families. This resource explains what asynchronous development is and how parents and carers can use this understanding to better support their young person to grow, learn and know themselves.

What is asynchronous development?

Development refers to how a young person's abilities, skills, understanding, and ways of navigating the world change over time as they grow. It is shaped by physical changes in the brain as they mature, as well as by their learning experiences, relationships, and how well their environment supports their needs.

Asynchronous development means that different areas of development do not all progress at the same pace. A young person may mature quickly in some areas while developing more slowly in others.

We often have expectations about what young people "should" be able to do at certain ages, based on comparisons with peers, our own experiences, or general parenting advice. When an Autistic young person develops in ways that look quite different to this, it can understandably raise concern. It can help to know that asynchronous development is very common in Autistic young people and is an expected part of how Autistic brains develop.

It's also commonly experienced by young people with other neurodevelopmental differences such as those with ADHD, dyslexia, intellectual disability or giftedness. These and other conditions are also often co-occurring for Autistic people, and can all contribute to asynchronous development.

No two Autistic young people develop in the same way, and the skills a young person shows at one age don't reliably predict where they will be later on. Development continues to shift over time, particularly as environments, supports and demands change.



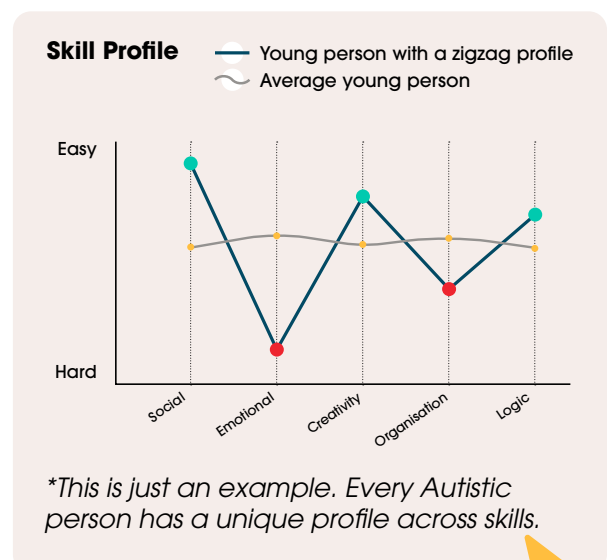
“Most of the Autistic young people I work with have significant differences to their peers in a range of different developmental areas. Young people and their families usually appreciate this being explained to them as a common experience for Autistic people. It is common to see ranges of up to 5-10 years between developmental areas that are behind or ahead compared to expectations or their peers. You don’t tend to see that level of variation with neurotypical children who I’d estimate typically only have a difference of up to 18 months between developmental areas compared to the majority of young Autistic people of a similar age”

Trudy Brunton, Accredited Mental Health Social Worker

While asynchronous development describes how abilities grow and change over time, a developmental profile is a snapshot of where a young person is right now across different areas of skills. Many Autistic young people have highly variable profiles meaning there are large differences between their areas of strength and areas of challenge. Some people call this a ‘spiky profile’ but a more affirming term is a **‘zigzag profile’**. For some Autistic young people, this can mean being several years ahead of peers in some areas while being several years behind in others.

When this information is not understood or supported, this can cause significant stress and affect a young person’s development over time. Parents and teachers may assume a young person should be able to manage certain things based on their age, or because they are clearly capable in so many other areas. These assumptions, while understandable, can place young people under pressure that doesn’t match their actual capacity.

Zigzag profiles can be easy to miss. Strengths can compensate for areas of challenge, and challenges can obscure strengths that are genuinely there. For example, a young person with a strong memory might use it to learn social scripts that help them navigate difficult situations, making their challenges less visible. A young person with real talent for creative writing might struggle to show this if fine motor difficulties make handwriting painful or slow. And a young person with a gift for finding more efficient ways to do things might come across as “difficult or oppositional” if their communication skills haven’t developed at the same rate as their problem-solving ability. When strengths and needs are hidden in this way, it can take a real toll on a young person’s self-esteem and their ability to understand themselves.



The important role parents and carers play in how young people come to know themselves

Parents, carers and other trusted adults play a central role in how young people develop a sense of who they are. Having your strengths genuinely recognised, and your challenges and the feelings that come with them acknowledged and validated, is not just a nice experience, it is an important part of how identity develops. When trusted adults can accurately reflect who a young person is as a whole and complex person, it supports their ability to understand themselves, navigate difficulties, make the most of their strengths, and speak up for what they need.

Because zigzag profiles can be so hidden, many Autistic young people miss out on this experience, or are only ever partially recognised for who they are. Their strengths may go unnoticed, their challenges misattributed, or both. Over time, this can significantly affect a young person's self-esteem, their sense of identity, and their long-term mental health. Partly this also occurs because there can be a tension between the less mature and more mature aspects of the young person.

This is one of the most valuable things you can offer your young person, and it doesn't require professional testing or formal assessment. It comes from taking the time to get to know them as a whole person, and reflecting back what you see in a way that is honest, specific and affirming.

Supporting your young person to understand themselves

Professional testing can sometimes help identify aspects of an Autistic young person's strengths and challenges and can be particularly useful if you suspect co-occurring conditions such as learning disabilities, or if formal documentation would help access specific supports. If you do involve professionals, look for those who take a neurodiversity-affirming approach, and keep in mind that skills and abilities can change quickly, so assessment information is most useful when it is recent.

But formal testing is not needed for every young person, and it can't replace being truly known by people who care about them. What a young person does on a test gives you one kind of information. How they approach challenges, what they enjoy, what they find hard, how they relate to others, how they think about things and feel about their experiences build a fuller picture of who they are. Getting to know your young person in this way, and helping them to understand themselves, is also not a one-off conversation. It is an ongoing process that strengthens your relationship over time. Many parents and carers find it hard to talk about strengths and challenges in a way that feels balanced, or struggle to get their young person to go beyond one-word answers. The following tips are designed to help with both.



Talking with your young person

Talking with your young person about their strengths, challenges and experiences of being different can feel difficult to get right. You might worry about saying the wrong thing, making them feel worse, or not knowing how to respond if they share something painful. For some parents and carers the challenge is simply getting their young person to open up at all.

These are common experiences, and it makes sense to feel that way. These conversations touch on identity, difference and self-worth, and that makes them feel high stakes. The tips below are not a script, and you won't always get it right, and that's okay. What matters most is that your young person experiences you as genuinely curious about who they are and willing to keep trying. These tips apply whether you are having casual everyday conversations with your young person or using the [My Unique Mind toolkit](#) that complements this resource.



Pick your moment and ask questions that go deeper

If you are starting the conversation, choose a time when your young person is relaxed and not stressed or distracted. Broad questions like “how was your day?” can be hard for many Autistic young people to answer. More specific questions tend to work better, for example asking how they found a particular class or exam rather than the whole day.

Another good approach is to open with something you noticed or were proud of, and then ask them about their experience of it.

“I really loved that painting you made. You did such a good job of showing the emotion in the person’s face. What was it like working on that? Was there any part of it you found tricky, or anything you particularly enjoyed?”

Once they’ve shared something, follow-up questions can help you both learn more about their experiences, what they enjoy, what they find hard, and what matters to them.

“What’s the part of getting ready for school in the morning that you find hardest?”

“What did you enjoy most about working on that assignment? Was there anything that felt harder to do?”

Validate feelings

Feelings are an important part of someone's experience and are not something we choose or control. They are always valid, even when they relate to a misunderstanding or lead to behaviour that isn't ideal. When a young person shares something difficult, it can be tempting to jump straight to reassurance or problem-solving or sometimes be dismissive of something that might appear hard. But usually what helps most first is simply having their feelings acknowledged. Most people, young or old, feel better when they feel understood.

When your young person shares an experience, listen for how they are feeling about it and reflect that back before anything else.

"That sounds really frustrating. It makes sense that you'd feel that way, especially when you worked so hard on it."

Validate the experience of being different

If your young person brings up challenges they face or compares themselves to others their age, it can help to acknowledge that yes, they probably are different to many of their peers in a number of ways, and that this is okay. Being different is not the same as something being wrong with them. You might find it helpful to share the zigzag profile infographic with them as a starting point for this conversation.

It can also be worth helping them see that differences are often only experienced as problems when the environment, expectations or context don't fit their needs. This includes strengths, which can sometimes feel like a burden rather than an asset if they show up in situations where they aren't recognised or valued.

"I know it can be really hard when things feel different for you compared to other kids. But different doesn't mean wrong. Your brain just works in its own way, and some of the things that feel hard right now have a lot to do with the situation not quite fitting you, not with something being wrong with who you are."

Notice strengths and personal qualities and reflect them back specifically

As your young person shares their experiences, listen for what their reactions, interests and feelings might tell you about their personal qualities and strengths. Try to be as specific as possible when you reflect these back, and relate them to the experiences they shared.

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If it is hard to do this in the moment, you can always come back to it later. It is also important to check in with your young person about whether what you've reflected feels accurate to them. Sometimes we will get it wrong, and that's okay.

"I know it's really hard when you don't win at chess club, especially when you've tried so hard. But can I tell you something I've noticed about you? Even when you've lost several games in a row, you don't give up. You keep showing up and keep trying. That kind of persistence and focus, especially on something you really care about, is a genuine strength and not everyone has it. How does it feel to hear that? Is it something you've noticed in yourself too?"

Ask what they think they are good at, then build on it

Young people will often have some sense of what they are good at, whether through their own experience, grades, or things others have said to them. But it can be hard to fully take this on board as a genuine part of who they are until it is also reflected back by a parent, carer or other trusted adult. You can invite this by simply asking them directly and then adding your own observations to build on what they share.

When you reflect strengths back, try to be as specific as possible. Rather than telling a young person they are smart, tell them they are great at spotting connections between ideas, or that they approach problems in a genuinely original way. That kind of specificity is much more meaningful and provides them a better understanding of how their mind works which might help with how they approach future challenges or learning.

If your young person can't accept that they have any strengths

Some young people find it very hard to accept positive reflections about themselves, even when they are offered genuinely. If this happens, don't just push harder or try to convince them. Focus on their feelings, not as a sign that they are right about themselves, but as something that must be very difficult to feel about themselves.

It might also help to shift away from framing things as strengths or positives and to focus on more neutral observations and personal qualities. Helping your young person feel accurately known can be more meaningful and easier to receive than being told they are good at something. With consistent reflections over time, this may shift as they build a stronger sense of self-worth.

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This can also be a valuable time to strengthen your relationship. Because zigzag profiles are often so hidden, many parents and carers will have missed some of the positive qualities their young person has shown over time. Being honest about that can make a real difference to your connection, their self-understanding, and their openness to taking in more positive reflections in the future.

“It must be really hard to feel that way about yourself. It makes me sad to hear that, but it also makes sense, and I think it’s something a lot of Autistic young people experience. Being different can mean that really wonderful qualities and strengths get missed more easily, and I’m sorry if I’ve contributed to that. I really want to understand you better, and I hope one day you’ll be able to see the great things I see in you too, because they are there.”

Reflect back many different aspects of who they are

It can be easy to unintentionally put all the focus on a few aspects of a young person’s development, especially where they may seem very different, for example their academic abilities or social skills. When a young person only ever hears about one or two dimensions of themselves, even if these are real strengths, they can feel only partially known. They may come to believe that only areas where they are exceptional, or have significant challenges, are worth paying attention to, which can skew how they see themselves overall. If they feel their strengths are only in one area, and challenges begin to arise in that area, this can have a much bigger impact on their sense of identity than if they have a more complete picture of themselves.

Try to reflect back a wide range of qualities and experiences over time, including how they relate to others, what they care about, how they approach challenges, what brings them joy, and how they think and learn and how they are going in developing everyday life skills. The [My Unique Mind toolkit](#) (see link on page 11) is designed with this in mind, with prompts that span many different aspects of a young person’s life and areas of potential strength.

“I was just thinking today about how responsible you have become. You have been so consistent in helping out around the house, and I noticed you even took the initiative to take out the rubbish yesterday without being asked. I really appreciate that, and I want you to know it doesn’t go unnoticed. That’s not something all teenagers would think to do.”

Supporting a young person's development and learning

Understanding your young person's profile of strengths, challenges and asynchronous development creates real opportunities to adapt expectations, environments and supports in ways that better match their actual needs.

Capacity and timing

Areas of difficulty are often a source of concern for young people, parents and teachers alike. It helps to understand that developing new skills requires two things:

the capacity to learn something

AND

the opportunity to learn it

Both matter.

Autistic brains develop differently, and some capacities, particularly in areas like executive functioning such as planning, organisation, emotional regulation and memory, may take longer to mature than they would for most peers. Co-occurring conditions such as ADHD or specific learning disabilities can also play a role in a young person's capacity. In many cases these skills do develop, just on a different timeline. It is important that the support and scaffolding a young person receives matches where they are, not where their age might suggest they 'should' be.

The role of stress and the environment

Stress and environment play a much bigger role in learning than is often recognised. Learning is most possible when stress is low, when it is interesting, and when a young person can practice skills in ways that suit how they learn best. Many Autistic young people experience significant stress at school and at home due to things like sensory or communication differences or from having learning needs that are different to the way things are taught at school. This can put them at a significant disadvantage compared to other students. Reducing this stress through environmental changes and accommodations is one of the most important things that can be done to support their long-term development.



Supports and accommodations

Asynchronous development is a difference, not a deficit. It doesn't mean something is wrong with a young person, or that they won't develop specific skills over time. When supporting areas of difficulty, the goal should be practical, individualised help that enables a young person to participate, not support that makes them stand out or treats their differences as problems to be fixed. For example, a young person with fine motor difficulties who struggles with handwriting might find that typing allows them to complete the same work as their classmates in a way that handwriting simply doesn't. While it can be beneficial to create additional opportunities to develop areas of challenge, this should never come at the expense of participating in the same learning as their peers.

It is equally important not to overlook young people who are significantly advanced in certain areas, particularly where those areas connect to their interests and future goals. Insufficient challenge can be a genuine source of stress, and without adequate support it can contribute to disengagement, loss of motivation, school can't and mental health difficulties, especially when combined with a heavy focus on areas of difficulty.

Supports and accommodations work best when they are individualised and view a young person holistically. This matters because a young person's specific needs are often shaped by a combination of factors, which may include their Autistic neurotype, co-occurring conditions, and cultural background. It is also important for supports to be flexible and responsive as young people grow, taking into account how needs might shift over time due to factors such as hormonal changes and life experiences.

Consider interests and learning needs to support areas of challenge

Many Autistic young people find it much easier to focus and engage when something connects to their interests, and this is often reflected in their zigzag profile. Areas tied to interests are often more strongly developed than those that aren't. When supporting a young person in areas of greater challenge, finding ways to link learning to their interests can make a real difference to their engagement and progress.

Understanding how your young person learns best is equally useful. Knowing whether they take in information better through multimedia, mind maps, hands-on experience or independent research, for example, can help them and the people supporting them find approaches that make learning easier. This might mean tackling a school assignment in a different way, or learning a new life skill through a format that better suits their learning needs. The **My Unique Mind toolkit** includes activities designed to help identify this part of a young person's profile and consider ways to utilise these insights and other strengths to support their development.



Advocating for and making individual adjustments at home and school

Home is often the easiest place to start once you have a better understanding of your young person's profile. Where possible, work collaboratively with your young person on this. They will often have their own ideas about what might help them in areas of difficulty and the approaches they find best to learn new things. Equally important is supporting opportunities to build on strengths and work towards their goals.

It can also help to involve allied health professionals. An occupational therapist, for example, can suggest ways to better accommodate sensory needs at home and identify tools or strategies that might also be possible to use at school. If executive functioning is an area of difficulty, there are many practical supports available, from visual schedules to calendar alerts, that can make a real difference to daily life. For some young people it may also be worth speaking with a paediatrician about whether medication, or medication review, could help with focus, sleep, anxiety or other challenges that are affecting learning.

When it comes to school, it is important to communicate your young person's specific needs clearly to their teachers. Asynchronous development is not always well understood in school settings, so it can help to share this resource as part of those conversations. Working together with school staff to develop an individual learning plan, one that includes specific adjustments, accounts for sensory needs, and builds on your young person's strengths and interests, can make a significant difference for many young people.



My Unique Mind is a companion toolkit to this resource, designed to be used together by parents/carers and their young person.

It provides structured prompts and questions to help explore a young person's strengths, personal qualities, ways of thinking and learning, and their interests and goals. It is designed to be flexible, and can be worked through together over several sessions, used as a starting point for more casual conversations over time, or explored by the young person on their own first before sharing with a trusted adult.

Some other resources from Amaze that might be helpful:



Executive functioning resources for Autistic teens



Interoception: A toolkit for parents/carers of Autistic young people in secondary school



School can't resources for parents/carers and teachers

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