

INTERACTING WITH AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Topic

In this video, Lydia X. Z. Brown explains how autism, a form of neurodiversity, affects how individuals interact with and are perceived by others. Lydia provides practical suggestions for engaging with autistic people. Note that Lydia, like an increasing number of people in the autistic community, prefers identity-first language. In other words, they prefer the terminology “autistic people” versus “people with autism”.

Relevance of Topic to System-Involved Youth with Disabilities

Lydia defines autism as: “A developmental disability that you are born with that lasts your entire life and that affects every part of your body and brain.” Lydia explains that autism “affects the way people sense things, think, process information, communicate, and interact with the world”.

It is not always obvious that a person is autistic. An individual who seems “quirky”, or not fully aware of what is going on around them, may or may not be autistic or neurodivergent in some way. Therefore, it is important to assume that whatever a person is doing, they are doing for a reason. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) describes several behaviors that may indicate that a person is autistic. An autistic person *may or may not exhibit these behaviors, and need not demonstrate all of these behaviors to be autistic*:

- They may not point at objects to show interest (e.g., not point at an airplane flying over).
- They may not look at objects when another person points at them.
- They may not show interest in other peoples’ situation, including distress.
- They may avoid eye contact because it is physically uncomfortable or because doing so allows them to better focus on the conversation.
- They may not seek the company of others.
- They may have trouble understanding other people’s feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- They may appear to be unaware when people talk to them but respond to other sounds.
- They may be very interested in people but may not know how to talk or relate to them.
- They may repeat or echo words or phrases said to them or repeat words or phrases in place of typical language.
- They may have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions.
- They may engage in repetitive actions such as rocking back and forth, hand-flapping, or vocalizations.
- They may walk in an atypical manner (e.g., rigid, “clumsy” or with the torso leaning forward).
- They may have trouble adapting to changes in routine or changing from one activity to another.
- They may have sensory differences – be over or under stimulated - and react atypically to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound.

While individuals may behave, communicate, interact, and learn in different ways, *abilities among autistic people vary widely*. For instance, some autistic people have well developed conversational skills whereas others’ skills may be less developed; and some people may require assistive technology devices in order to communicate. Autism is often accompanied by medical issues such as gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, seizures, or sleep disorders, as well as mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and attention issues. Behaviors of youth on the autism spectrum may be similar to those of other people in the same setting or situation; yet, their behaviors may be perceived as dangerous, suspicious, or criminal by others who misinterpret the reason for the behavior. Research indicates that autistic people



are no more likely to commit crimes and are over-represented in the criminal legal system. A 2017 study suggests that nearly 20 percent of young people on the spectrum have been stopped and questioned by police by age 21 - about half of those by age 15; and, about 5 percent are arrested by age 21. When differences in behavior are misunderstood, and misinterpreted as threatening or criminal, autistic people are at risk of being harmed in their interactions with educators, law enforcement professionals, and others.

Recommendations for Creating Systems Change

- Acknowledge personal and systemic biases.
- Assume the person is capable.
- Assume the person has a good reason for doing what they are doing even if you don't understand the behavior.
- Let the person lead; provide them information in the way that they indicate works best for them.
- Allow the person time to respond to questions.
- Speak in short sentences with concrete requests or questions; avoid using figurative speech.
- Avoid quick movements and loud noises.
- Avoid touching the person.
- Assume the person has experienced trauma.
- Be mindful of intersecting identities and oppressions such as racism and/or sexism that the person may experience.

Learn More

- [Article on Teens with Autism and Risk of Police Run-Ins](#)
- [Emergency Disclosure Cards](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network Resources for Individuals with Autism](#)
- [Article on Best Practices in Transition Planning for Students with Autism](#)

Presenter Information

Lydia X. Z. Brown is an advocate, attorney, and strategist whose work focuses on interpersonal and state violence against disabled people living at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and language. They founded and direct the Fund for Community Reparations for Autistic People of Color's Interdependence, Survival, and Empowerment, and co-edited *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*. Lydia holds adjunct lecturer positions at Georgetown University and at American University. They serve on the American Bar Association's Commission on Disability Rights and chair the ABA's Civil Rights and Social Justice Section's Disability Rights Committee. To learn more about Lydia's work, go to [Laboring for Disability Justice & Liberation website](#)

