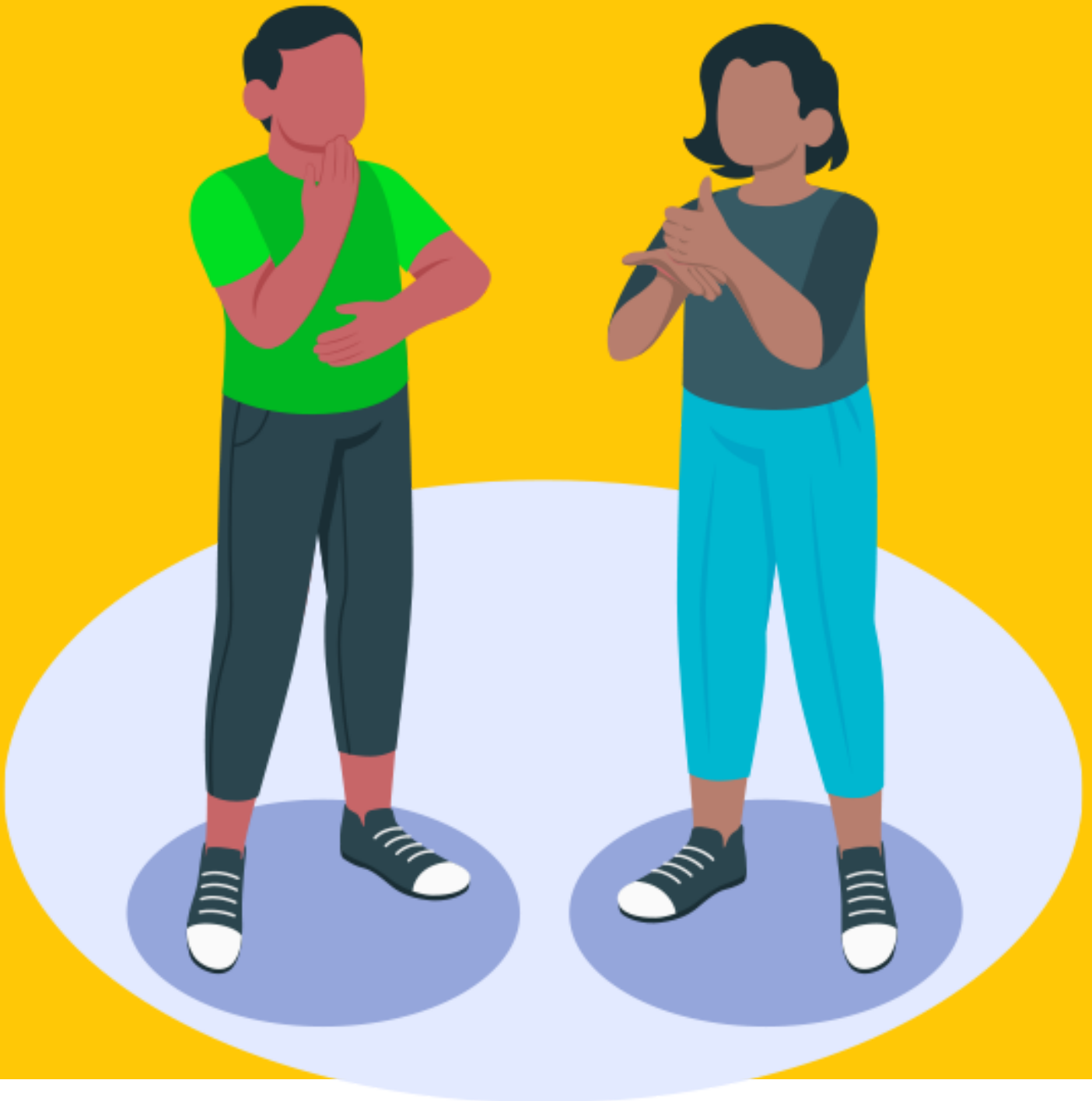


Sign language for autistic individuals



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One of the most common (and often distressing) symptoms of autism is difficulty with speech and language. For some people, this can be so severe that they're completely non-verbal.

Thankfully, however, there are several methods of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) that can help to bridge the gap. Let's take a closer look at the popular non-verbal communication, and how it can be a powerful communication tool for autistic and non-verbal individuals.



Autism and sign language

It's not fully understood why some autistic people don't learn to speak fluently. Sometimes even therapies and interventions have no effect. Scientists believe it may be connected to problems with auditory processing (where our brain interprets words that we hear) or difficulties with the motor skills needed to form words.

This is why sign language can be a more effective communication method. Being completely visual, it's more easily accessible to the autistic brain.

The benefits of teaching sign language to autistic individuals

There are so many great reasons to teach sign language to autistic and non-verbal individuals, including:

It encourages spontaneous communication:

When people have full autonomy to communicate, they will be more willing to try without prompting.

They can better navigate social situations:

Communication is at the core of social interaction, and sign language will not only allow them to talk with others, it can help them to understand social cues too.

It improves their mental health:

Lack of feeling understood correlates strongly with depression and anxiety, but sign language can change that.

They have fewer meltdowns:

Similar to mental health issues, meltdowns are often the end result of communication problems.

They don't have to rely so much on auditory processing:

Processing spoken words can be tough for autistic people, so sign language may be easier for them to understand.



Challenges and considerations

Sign language is a fantastic tool, but like any language, some people will find learning it easier than others.

However, autistic people, in particular, might find sign language difficult because:

They may have learning difficulties:

One in three people with autism also have a learning disability that could make it harder for them to grasp sign language.

It involves extensive use of motor skills:

Some autistic people struggle with precise movements of their hands and arms, which are necessary for sign language.

It requires extended periods of eye contact:

Eye contact with conversation partners is a key part of sign language etiquette, but people with autism might not enjoy this.

They may not be able to interpret facial expressions:

While sign language is mostly communicated via hand movements, facial expressions are also used to better convey context or emotions.

Stimming could be misconstrued:

Many autistic individuals use their hands for self-stimulatory behaviour, which could be misinterpreted by people they are signing with.

