



CHECKLIST FOR MEDIA: HOW TO WRITE ABOUT AUTISM

When interviewing, writing about or presenting on Autism, or people on the Autism Spectrum, the I CAN Network recommends that you refer to these key tips.



Use enabling language



Use “identity-first” or reflective language



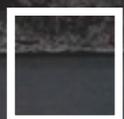
Use an interviewee with Autism to add personal perspective



Use strengths-based, respectful language



Avoid controversial topics and stereotypes that don't add to the conversation



Use appropriate visual imagery

The I CAN Network is Australia's first social enterprise run by people with Autism. This makes us unique and offers you the distinct advantage of including a real, autistic voice in your media piece. Our team can provide comments on news of importance to the Autism community across many angles, including education, politics, employment, social affairs, advocacy, health, business, and more. We can work with any medium, including video, audio and textual pieces.

We encourage journalists writing about Autism to consult with a member of the Autism community, preferably a person with Autism, to add an inclusive, personal and realistic dimension to their work. The I CAN Network is well placed to source this voice for you from among members of our Network.

Contact us for expert, autistic commentary and voices on issues of importance to the Autism and neurodiversity community.

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I CAN NETWORK MEDIA GUIDELINES

When interviewing, writing about or presenting on Autism, or people on the Autism Spectrum, the I CAN Network recommends that you refer to these key tips. These best practice guidelines, based on what people on the Autism Spectrum feel best represents them, can be referred to by content creators to assist you in crafting respectful and accurate pieces about Autism.

ENABLING LANGUAGE

Functioning labels discount the strengths of people labelled as “low functioning” and can ignore the needs of people labelled as “high functioning”. Likewise, “severe” Autism indicates that there is a “mild” Autism. As an alternative, we can be more descriptive about the needs of a specific person or group of people in a neutral way, such as going into detail about a specific “support requirements” of a person if describing them. At I CAN, we say “people with greater support requirements” to make sure we are enabling all people on the Autism Spectrum.

IDENTITY-FIRST AND REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE

The I CAN Network encourages the media to use identity-first language, eg. ‘Autistic’, when discussing Autism. Our mentoring program actively develops Autistic pride, self-acceptance, confidence, optimism and belonging in people on the Autism Spectrum. It’s important to our mentors and mentees that their identity in being Autistic is celebrated and respected by the wider community. Our survey of 60 Autistics also showed that our families were comfortable being referred to as ‘on the Autism Spectrum’ or ‘on the Spectrum’. You can also take a reflective approach and ask your interviewee what language they would prefer.

AUTISM PERSPECTIVE

If you are putting together a piece on Autism, you should include a perspective from someone on the spectrum. The I CAN Network can put you in touch with a spokesperson who is knowledgeable on the subject you are writing about. Interviewing a person with Autism is not hard; remain open minded and accommodating. You may need to rephrase some questions, or present them in a different format (for example, a subject may prefer email contact to speaking on the phone), but ultimately your story will be enriched by their perspective.

STRENGTHS-BASED, RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

Use strengths-based, respectful language. Many in the Autism community do not see Autism as a deficit; rather, they see it as a unique skill set, perspective and way of living. To reflect this in your work, it is recommended that you avoid deficit-focussed language like “suffers from Autism”, and resist the temptation to categorise Autism as a disease, disorder or illness to be cured. Further, try to minimise the emphasis on challenges: people with Autism are normal people who are just living their lives, so being able to complete an everyday task is not ‘heroic’ or ‘brave’. It is also important to remember that Autism is a spectrum; as such, as the saying goes, when you’ve met one person with Autism, you’ve met one person with Autism. Autism presents differently in each person, so steer clear of language such as “he doesn’t look like he has Autism” or “she doesn’t act Autistic”.

CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS AND STEREOTYPES

Controversial topics, such as cures for Autism or the debunked myth that vaccinations cause Autism, can incite strong reactions from many of those in the Autism community. As with any interview, you should research the topic you are considering prior to speaking with a member of the community, to determine whether it a) adds value to the Autism conversation; b) contributes to outdated stereotypes and myths about Autism or c) is likely to be offensive or insulting to your interviewee.

APPROPRIATE VISUAL IMAGERY

Consider the visuals used to accompany your piece. Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words, so what message are you sending with your image? For example, images on articles about Autism often use puzzle pieces, or depictions of children hidden behind walls or blurred. Such images can play into the stereotypes of Autism as a mystery and a negative thing. People with Autism are people too – try photographing them where they feel comfortable, in a way that displays their character and personality as you would with any other subject or interviewee.

