

The Role of Audiologists in Supporting Autistic People

The Position of Speech-Language & Audiology Canada

It is the position of Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC) that audiologists play an essential role in supporting Autistic people and their communities of support through evidence-informed audiology practices that are person-centred, neuro-diversity affirming, and inclusive. A comprehensive audiological assessment is a fundamental and necessary step in moving forward with proper diagnosis and appropriate services that meet the needs of Autistic people.

Background/Rationale

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that may present in many ways. It can have an effect on sensory processing, social communication, the ability to carry out certain tasks, and emotional and behavioural regulation (Government of Canada, 2023).

Some features of autism can be similar to those of auditory disorders such as hearing loss, sound tolerance issues, or auditory processing difficulties. Features may also include speech production differences, differences in social communication and social interaction, difficulty focusing, as well as inattentiveness (Egelhoff et al., 2005). If autism is suspected, a comprehensive audiological evaluation needs to be completed to assist in proper diagnosis or differential diagnosis, as an individual can have autism and hearing impairment (Easterbrooks & Handley, 2005; Szymanski & Brice, 2008). Interfering behaviours (e.g., difficulty conditioning or attending to the task) noted during hearing evaluations may also serve as a predictor of an autism diagnosis (Meagher et al., 2021). Research evidence has shown that best practices in service delivery to Autistic people are collaborative, customized to the individual's needs, and informed by developmental and behavioural principles (CAHS: Autism in Canada, 2022;

National Research Council, 2001; National Standards Project, 2009; National Standards Project 2015; Ospina et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2017; Rubin, 2017; Sandbank et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2014; Zwaigenbaum et al., 2015).

Audiologists assess, diagnose and provide support and interventions to individuals with peripheral and central hearing loss, tinnitus, sound tolerance problems, vestibular and balance disorders, auditory processing disorders, and other auditory differences across the lifespan. Audiologists also play a role in optimizing listening and learning environments and providing their expertise in the design of acoustically friendly environments for Autistic people (Black et al 2022).

Audiologists must strive to make clinical environments more supportive of Autistic people and modify clinical strategies by considering the experiences that some Autistic people may have, such as hypersensitivity to sounds (Lane et al., 2010). Objective assessment measures, including otoacoustic emissions and auditory evoked potentials, should be used to confirm behavioural testing when necessary to ensure the accuracy of audiological findings.

Audiologists work collaboratively with Autistic people and their communities of support to understand and address their auditory function and hearing needs. This helps remove barriers to participation and promote more effective interprofessional practice from team members who provide assessment and support services to meet Autistic people's needs.

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