

Are you special or special needs?

By Katherine Gallagher

I have heard the term special or special needs frequently used by friends or family members or the education system when referring to someone on the spectrum. Even though people do not use this phrase when interacting with me online or in person, I have been thinking a lot about this term, especially how it is implied.

It has never made much sense to me as to why people must confirm special or special needs verbally. Sometimes the phrase special needs are more often used as a quick brief way to explain to a stranger or acquaintance their autistic friend or family member, without having to go into an in-depth conversation about what that means. This happened to me once when I became close with another family and their autistic daughter. It did not click why they said she was special needs until I began spending more time with them and understanding them better. They saw her as special, but to me, it was just a way she needed to regulate.

Oftentimes, this becomes a new way of explaining to myself. These special things that this autistic boy/girl/adult or child may need to do to feel good or stay calm. The term special has many explanations, but for me having to express that to another adult verbally is not appropriate or necessary.

I have always thought that a blind or a deaf person is special because of the skills they needed to learn to become independent and function in the world. I do not feel like it is necessary to tell them I think they are special.

Is it essential that we use the term special in the autistic community and for every autistic? And are we overusing this phrase altogether? Think about it for yourself.

Are you comfortable with the phrase special? Are you comfortable if someone says that you are special because they know you are autistic? Is there a new term or a new way of phrasing that you would prefer? Or do you like someone saying that you have special needs?

Again, my perspective on this may differ from yours, but it is something that we need to reflect on and if this term aligns with what we think of ourselves.

About the author

I created this [Website](#) to express my unique autism perceptions. I share my insights and resources here as a person with lived experience. I encourage you to read my [About Me](#) and [Portfolio](#) pages. Or the [What is Autism](#) page for a more in-depth definition.

Autism is very unique and complex. Each person experiences autism differently. My opinions and information are expressions about myself and my experiences.

Perception means the ability to see things. It is the ability to become aware of something through the senses. Autism has given me a unique reality and open mind. I believe it is important for others to have their own unique perceptions as individuals on the autism spectrum.



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