

## Introduction to Autism



Autism isn't something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside... Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive. It colours every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person. (Sinclair, 1993.)

Autism is a lifelong condition affecting the way the person relates to and communicates with people and the world around them. It is described as a spectrum condition, indicating that, whilst all individuals with autism share particular differences, their Autism will affect each person in distinct ways; the specific nature of how and to what extent Autism affects each individual is unique.

The spectrum of Autism includes children who have additional learning difficulties who may be pre verbal or have limited verbal communication, through to children with average or high levels of intelligence and a wide ranging vocabulary but struggle with social communication, interaction and relationships.

Current estimates suggest that there are 1 in 100 children with Autism in the UK. More boys than girls are affected with an average ratio of 4 to 1.

The Autism Education Trust describes Autism in terms of difference not deficit. A different way of looking at the world to neuro typical children or adults.

The four areas of difference are:

1. **Social communication and language:** Differences in understanding language and communication, sarcasm, tone of voice, facial expression, jokes, and gestures.
2. **Social and emotional understanding:** Differences in understanding social behaviour, understanding the feelings of others, starting and maintaining conversations and making and maintaining friendships.



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3. **Information processing and interests:** Differences in planning, perception, generalising and predicting, understanding concepts, transitions and passions for interest.
4. **Sensory processing:** Differences in perceiving and processing sensory information. Hypo sensitivity (low), hyper sensitivity (high), to touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing, vestibular (inner ear) and proprioceptive (body) feedback.

To develop good practice and effective inclusion for pupils with Autism, practitioners need to not only consider the Autistic pupils' way of communicating and relating to others but also adjust the way they act, relate to and communicate with the pupil.

(NAS, 2015; AET, 2012).

FURTHER INFORMATION:

National Autistic Society (NAS): <http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism.aspx>

Autism Education Trust (AET): <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/about-aet/what-is-autism.aspx>

P. Taylor: A Beginner's Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorders: Essential Information for Parents and Professionals.

## The Four Areas of Difference

### Social Communication and Language

Students with Autism may have difficulty processing and retaining verbal information, even if they have good verbal skills themselves. They may find it difficult to use and interpret facial expression especially when processing language at the same time. This is particularly true when Autistic pupils are anxious or stressed.

As a general rule instructions should be short and simple. When speaking to an individual with Autism, first gain the pupils attention by using their name. Language should be clear and direct without the use of ambiguity, idioms or sarcasm. Remember that eye contact can be very difficult for people with Autism and should not be insisted on.

As humans we use a variety of social skills whenever we interact. When playing alone the child with Autism does not need to use or understand social skills, which is why many children might prefer solitary play; it is free from social and communication demands.



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Typically developing children begin to learn these skills in early life and develop them over a number of years, usually with little direct instruction. Children explore their environment using trial and error to solve problems. They observe others, attempt to imitate them and try to join in. They generally learn from their mistakes and skills develop as they grow and begin to understand social rules. Children with Autism do not appear to develop social skills in the same way their peers do. Therefore adults need to act as 'interpreters' for them; try to process social situations for the child and explain them in a way that the child will understand.

Modelling, role play, social stories, cartooning and social/friendship groups can all help children with Autism to develop communication and social skills.

Social and communication skills include all of the following and more:

**PLAY SKILLS:** sharing space, sharing equipment, awareness of others, joining others play, taking turns, understanding and coping with 'NO', reciprocal play, turn taking, compromising, conflict resolution, understanding and managing the concept of losing, , ending play, knowing when play has ended etc.

**CONVERSATION SKILLS:** listening skills, greetings, awareness of personal space, responding to others, joining a conversation, talking about a subject (especially when not of your choosing), verbal turn taking, ending a conversation, knowing when a conversation has ended etc.

**FRIENDSHIP SKILLS:** include many of the above and below but also knowing what a friend is, being able to choose appropriate friends, recognise true friends from insincere friends, recognising and being able to cope when friendship is not reciprocated, developing the ability to share a friend, understanding the difference between banter and bullying, dealing with peer pressure, etc.

**UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS:** understanding facial expressions, reading body language, understanding tone of voice (intonation, volume, pitch, and speed), and awareness of own body language, being able to recognise understand and name emotions, self-regulation skills, and anger management.

**RECOGNISING AND DEALING WITH CONFLICT:** includes many of the above (particularly anger management, self-regulation communication skills), theory of mind, the ability to ask for help, ability to walk away from a difficult situation, being assertive but not aggressive (and understanding the difference), recognising and dealing with bullying, etc.

Many children with Autism find it easier to understand the world around them when they are provided with visual support. Practitioners might use a visual timetable clearly showing



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the day/session/lessons activities, so that the child knows exactly what they will be doing and when. Schools often use computer software to create differentiated visual support in words, symbols or both simultaneously.

(AET, 2012; AET, 2015; NAS, 2015; Attwood et al., 2014; Lawson 2007)

### **Further Information:**

OL'GA BOGDASHINA. 2005. Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do We Speak the Same Language?

CATHERINE DELAMAIN & JILL SPRING. 2000. Developing Baseline Communication Skills

MICHAEL FARRELL. 2011. The Effective Teacher's Guide to Autism and Communication Difficulties: Practical strategies

NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY. 2015. <http://www.autism.org.uk>

### **Social and Emotional Understanding:**

The social use of language and the ability to intuitively know how to interact appropriately are recognised areas of deficit for children with Autism. It is a pervasive difference, affecting all areas of their lives. Consequently social understanding and emotional understanding must be taught specifically.

Social play is about learning to relate to others, playing and making friends, all of which are key elements for social inclusion, adjustment and well-being; these do not come naturally to children with Autism.

This can cause difficulties for them in social situations such as:

- Interaction with others
- Understanding social rules
- Friendships
- Eye contact



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## ▸ Understanding theirs and other people's emotions

Difficulties with social interaction may be most obvious in unstructured times, such as break, lunchtime, in the corridor and transition between lessons or areas of school.

Lack of social judgement is most likely to be apparent during whole class teaching when the Autistic child might shout out inappropriately or repeatedly interrupt. They may struggle to recognise social status; speaking to adults in the same way as they speak to their peers or making inappropriate comments.

Differences in social understanding might also be evident through the pupils' strict adherence to rules in a rigid way and literal interpretation of language. The pupil with Autism might also struggle to initiate and maintain friendships or integrate ideas (understand and accept that it is OK for someone to have a different idea or opinion to theirs).

They will have differences in the way they understand and regulate their own emotions and how they recognise and interpret the emotions of others. They may often appear to lack empathy although this is sometimes because they do not have the social imagination or understanding to know what to do when someone is hurt or upset.

It is necessary, when dealing with situations that arise from lack of social understanding, that the practitioner understands the perception of the child with Autism and does not presume that social understanding will match the level of academic ability. Therefore each situation needs to be dealt with individually.

Try to develop ways of 'hearing the pupil voice' by using systems, strategies and approaches that work for that individual (e.g. observation, mentoring, talking mats, and cartooning) to help the child explore what happened from their perspective. Through knowing this we can begin to help them try to understand the effect on others and how they might change their reactions or make different choices in the future. This probably will not happen immediately, it might require a lot of practice, as the child's ability to generalise is limited. Concepts will often have to be relearned in a variety of social situations.

There are a variety of approaches and strategies that practitioners can use to help develop the emotional, social and communication skills of children with Autism. They include:

### COMIC STRIP CONVERSATIONS



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Comic Strips can assist pupils with Autism to develop social understanding, by providing visual representations of the different elements of communication that take place in a conversation, using symbols and drawing. By seeing the different parts of a conversation represented visually, some abstract aspects of social communication (e.g. recognising the feelings, emotions and intentions of others) can be made more concrete and therefore easier for the child with Autism to understand.

## SOCIAL STORIES

Children with autism may be taught how to begin to understand and cope with social situations using Social Stories. Stories are written for the child, explaining in words and pictures, step by step, what will happen in situations where they might feel anxious and how they should try and behave in that situation. For example, a Social Story might be used to explain what a child should do if they lose a game or when there is a fire alarm.

## SOCIAL SKILLS

Some children with Autism respond well to drama and role play to help them learn social skills such as greetings, turn taking in conversation and beginning to recognise social cues. A buddy system or Circle of Friends might also help the child with Autism understand the social world of the playground and the classroom.

## CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

Circle of Friends is an approach to encourage the development of a support network for a child within a structured setting. It is not intended to provide instant friendship, but over the course of meetings and evaluation of set targets, the aim is that the child will begin to build closer relationships with peers. Between six and eight children are chosen as volunteers to be the Circle of Friends. Through a series of adult moderated meetings they help the Autistic pupil to express his or her feelings and hopefully reduce levels of anxiety. This can lead to improved social inclusion and greater levels of peer contact.

(NAS, 2015; AET, 2012; Ling, 2010; Dunn & Curtis 2003; Leicestershire County Council, ND)

## Further Information:

KARI DUNN BURON & MITZI CURTIS. 2003 The Incredible 5-point Scale: Assisting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Understanding Social Interactions and Controlling Their Emotional Responses



FIONA KNOTT AND ALINE-WENDY DUNLOP. 2007. A resource for working with children and young people with Autism. (NAS 710) Available to order from:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/products/core-nas-publications/developing-social-interaction-and-understanding.aspx>

JOHN LING. 2010. I Can't Do That! My Social Stories to Help with Communication, Self-Care and Personal Skills

National Autistic Society. 2015. <http://www.autism.org.uk/>

ELLEN NOTBOHM & VERONICA ZYSK .2012.Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew

CHRIS WHITE. 2008. The Social Play Record: A Toolkit for Assessing and Developing Social Play from Infancy to Adolescence

### **Information processing and interests**

Obsessive interests, rituals, routines and repetitive behaviour can be a source of pleasure for people with Autism and a strength in helping them to cope with daily life. But they can also limit children's involvement in other activities and can sometimes cause distress or anxiety.

Repetitive and rigid behaviour and rituals in children with autism are not the same as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), an anxiety disorder in which people experience repetitive thoughts and behaviours that cause them upset and distress.

Often people with autism have intense special interests, sometimes from a young age. These can change and develop over time or be lifelong, and can include anything from art, music, trains, TV characters and ICT. Some people with autism may excel and eventually have opportunities able to work or study in areas related to their special interests.

Special interest may sometimes be unusual but practitioners must remember that just because they are unusual to us does not diminish their importance to the child.

Differences in the way children with Autism process information can be a strength, allowing them to focus on the smallest detail and persist until something is achieved. However it can also cause difficulties for them in some areas such as personal organisation, homework, behaviour and transitions, which can impact on their engagement and inclusion at school.



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## ORGANISATION

Personal organisation is a recognised area of deficit for some pupils with Autism and can cause high levels of stress and anxiety. Visual prompts can be used to help children to organise themselves and their equipment independently thus promoting self-confidence and building self-esteem. All staff should remember that some will need longer to organise themselves at the beginning and ending of lessons and make reasonable adjustments to facilitate this.

## HOMEWORK

Differences in how information is processed mean children will often have difficulty remembering, starting and completing homework. They may not have heard or understood the instructions or the purpose of the work set.

This should not be interpreted as deliberate refusal. It may be necessary to explain visually why homework is important, maybe through a social story. The ability to generalise and transfer skills from school to home can also cause problems as can rigidity of thought around doing 'school' things at home and vice versa.

## BEHAVIOUR

The behaviour of some children with autism can be very difficult to deal with. It may not always be immediately obvious why the child is behaving in a particular way, and it can be hard to control the situation without knowing more about what lies behind it and what kinds of strategies to use. With differences in communication and information processing a child with autism may, for example, not be able to express their feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or frustration except in an outburst of unwanted behaviour.

They may have learnt from experience that such behaviour generally achieved their desired object. Therefore the teacher needs to analyse what had been going on before the outburst that might have upset the child, and teach them some other way to communicate what they need.

## TRANSITION

For some pupils with Autism transitions between lessons, playtime and lunchtime can pose considerable difficulties. This may be because they become more anxious in the busy, noisy, and unpredictable comings and goings.

It helps to have consistent strategies in place that the child can predict and trust to help overcome these issues. Arrangements might be made for the child to arrive and depart





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school/lessons/ or activities a little earlier than their peers to miss the 'hustle and bustle'. Staffed 'calm places' should be available at playtime and lunchtime to reduce anxieties during these unstructured times.

It is recognised that careful planning for moving to a new class or between primary and secondary school is essential to ensure that the transition is as successful as possible and stress and anxiety are minimised.

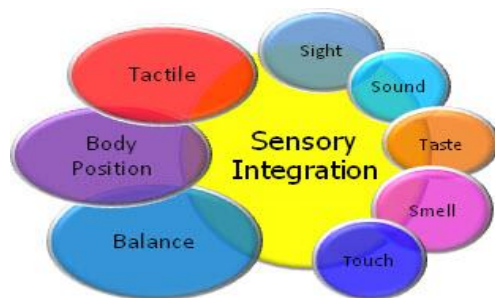
### Further Information:

NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY (NAS). 2015: <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/education/educational-professionals-in-schools/breaking-down-barriers-to-learning/planning-for-transition.aspx>

REBECCA A. MOYES. 2002. Addressing the Challenging Behaviour of Children with High Functioning Autism/Asperger Syndrome in the Classroom: A Guide for Teachers and Parents.

Temple Grandin. 2013. The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum

## Sensory Processing



As humans we constantly make responses to sensory input from within our bodies (internal) and from the environment (external).

Children with Autism can experience differences in the way they perceive and process sensory information. They may be hypo (under) or hyper (over) sensitivity to tastes, smells, sounds, touch, light or colours, vestibular (balance) and proprioception (body awareness).

These differences in sensory experiences and sensory processing can impact significantly on learning as difficulties interpreting sensory information can have an impact on how an individual feels, thinks, behaves or responds. This will affect how each child is able to focus



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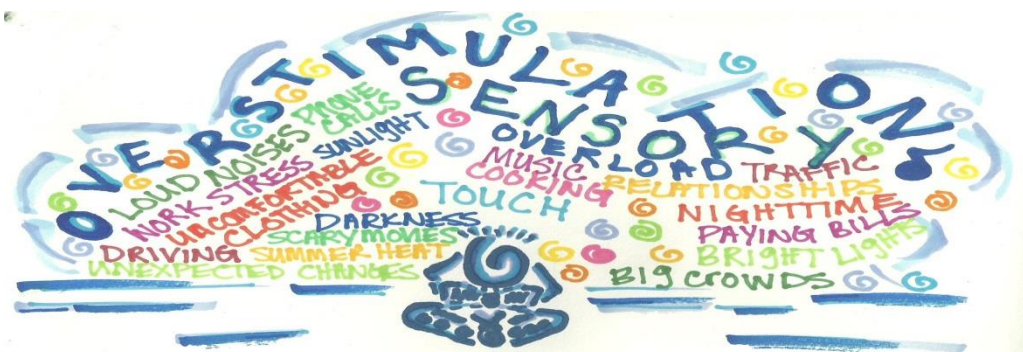
and engage in learning opportunities at any given time. It is important that staff adapt their teaching and communication style, the environment, and expectations in recognition of this.

Children with Autism may misinterpret sensory information, causing them to over-react (like the child who can't stand to be touched or bumped by others) or under-react (like the daydreamer child who takes a very long time to get ready for P.E). Children may therefore avoid distressing or confusing sensations, or seek out more sensations in order to learn more about it. Children who over-react (hyper sensitive) to certain stimuli may constantly be 'on edge' all day, whilst other children may be working twice as hard to consciously process sensory information that would normally happen automatically, or subconsciously for others (hypo sensitive); what an exhausting experience this must be for them!

It is important to recognise that difficulties interpreting sensory information can have an impact on how an individual feels, how he thinks and how he behaves or responds. Sensory seeking behaviour could indicate that a pupil with Autism is experiencing some sensory processing differences and higher levels of anxiety than his neuro typical peers. When a child with autism is over-stimulated and feeling anxious these behaviour's may help them feel calmer or safer. In consideration of this the pupil should be offered regular sessions throughout the day in a low arousal environment where he can relax and engage in activities of his choice.

Remember: If you have serious concerns regarding sensory differences for any of your pupils, speak to your Line Manager, SENCo, Deputy Head, or Head Teacher who may discuss concerns with parents / carers and encourage them to seek advice from a range of specialist agencies such as

- Occupational Therapy
- Dietary Advisory Services
- Physiotherapy
- Visually Impaired Service





(AET, 2012; AET, 2014; Gerland, 2013; NAS, 2014; Lawson, 2007; Grandin 1995)

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

LINDSEY BIEL. 2009. The definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Processing Issues. London: Blackwell

TARA DELANEY. 2009. 101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism, Asperger's and Sensory Processing Disorders. New York: McGraw Hill

SUE GASCOYN. 2011. Sensory Play: Play in the EYFS. London: Practical Pre School Books

SUE LARKEY. 2007. Practical Sensory Programmes for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. London: Jessica Kingsley

CORRINA LAURIE. 2014. Sensory Strategies: Practical ways to help children and young people with Autism learn and achieve. NAS: Available to order from:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/Products/Core-NAS-publications/Sensory-strategies.aspx>

NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY.2015. Accept Difference not Indifference.

<http://www.autism.org.uk/global/content/search%20results.aspx?q=sensory%20difference>