

5 Things to Know About ASD

1. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a group of lifelong developmental disabilities. They make up a spectrum of disorders under the autism umbrella, and are mainly characterised by challenges in social interaction, communication and imagination. These areas are sometimes known as the 'Triad of Impairments'. Increasingly, sensory integration difficulties are being linked to many people with ASD. The important thing to remember is that first and foremost the person with ASD is a person. Every person with ASD is different, therefore strategies that may have worked with one young person may not work with another. Be flexible!

A person with ASD may have challenges in some or all of the above areas. Asperger's syndrome is a type of autism. As well as ASD, some people may also have additional learning difficulties. ASDs occur more in boys than girls (ratio 4:1).

2. Social Interaction:

Some people with an ASD may find understanding the feelings of others difficult. They may be unaware of 'rules' of interaction such as how close to stand to someone, how to end an interaction, or what to talk about. Many of the social norms and rules that people usually understand without being told may not be understood by someone with ASD and will need clearly explaining. Social stories can be useful for supporting this. Some people with ASD may show unusual behaviour or respond to situations in unusual ways. This may be due to challenges in expressing or managing their own feelings and emotions.

Times of leisure, such as playtime, may be a cause of stress for some young people as they may be unsure about how to approach or interact with people. Try to think of alternative activities if this is the case.

Some people with ASD may not like making eye contact. This may cause a lot of stress and anxiety. Avoid making demands such as "look at me" as this could cause unnecessary stress.

3. Social Communication:

Some people with ASD take what is said very literally. For example "wait a minute" could literally be interpreted to mean "wait for exactly one minute". Avoid saying things that are not clear or have other meanings, or explain clearly what you mean when you say a phrase that may have alternative meanings. Sometimes people with ASD have difficulty reading facial expressions or tones of voice. Strategies in the classroom that rely on body language, facial expression or tone of voice may not work with young people with ASD. Do not assume they are being rude or awkward, they may genuinely not have read the social clues. Those with ASD may have difficulties with spoken language. This does not necessarily mean that they have any kind of learning difficulty. Many people with ASD may have a full understanding of what is being said but may not use speech. Often alternative methods of communication can be used such as electronic devices, sign language, or symbols. Working with a speech and language therapist can help support them in this. Be clear in what you say and give time for the person with ASD to process what you have said and respond. Sometimes this may take longer than it does for other people. Be patient

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4. Social Imagination:

Some young people with ASD have difficulty remembering what is happening next or what could happen. Having a personal or class schedule may help to reduce the stress caused by the unknown and support effective learning. Many young people with ASD are often very visual learners. At times of stress, having to listen and process words can be a challenge. Using visual prompts for activities, timetables, and communication can help reduce levels of stress and anxiety, including helping them to not become stressed initially. Sometimes changes in routine can be a challenge but this can be supported through the above strategies. Those with ASD may find imaginative play or work a challenge. They may engage with repetitive actions or repeat the same activity. This can be supported through structuring play or work with smaller steps to learn skills. People with ASD can still be creative and a lack of social imagination does not always limit their ability to engage with creative activities. Some people with ASD have special interests that they may know a lot about. This can sometimes be used as a tool to support learning. If it is a barrier to learning, talking to the young person about when it is and isn't ok to talk about their special interest can be useful.

5. Sensory:

Many people with ASD may be under or over sensitive to sensory input. This may fluctuate over the day so different strategies may be appropriate at different times. The main areas of sensory need are auditory (sound), tactile (touch), olfactory (smell), visual (sight), proprioceptive (joints/muscles/knowing where your body is), and vestibular (balance). Sensory integration is a huge challenge for many people with ASD and can often explain many behaviours that have no obvious cause such as challenging behaviour and self-stimulating behaviours. Occupational therapists or physiotherapists can often support in meeting the needs of young people with ASD.

Useful Websites/books:

National Autistic Society. www.autism.org.uk Great source of information for parents and teachers.

Sensory Integration Network. <http://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/> Information on Sensory Integration.

ASD and Me: Learning about high functioning Autism. By Teresa DeMars.

Ten Things Every child With Autism Wishes You Knew. By Ellen Notbohm.

Different Like Me: My Book of Autism Heroes. By Jennifer Elder and Marc Thomas.

Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome: A user guide to Adolescence. By Luke Jackson and Tony Attwood.

The Out-of-Sync Child- By Carol Stock Kranowitz.

The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun- By Carol Stock Kranowitz.