

What is AUTISM?

An Autism Spectrum Condition is a lifelong developmental disorder characterised by a triad of impairments, these are impairments in social interaction, communication (verbal and non verbal) and imagination. As well as the impairments children with autism often demonstrate repetitive behaviour patterns, narrow, obsessional interests, resistance to change, motor co-ordination difficulties and unusual sensitivity (see: What to be aware of). Autism is a spectrum condition, ranging from low to high functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome.

Children with autism experience physical and emotional problems in the same way as everybody else. However, considering the majority of children with autism have some level of learning disability and some may never speak, they have extreme difficulty conveying what is wrong to others. This can occasionally lead to inappropriate behaviour, which some may find challenging, especially when the child is anxious, such as in unfamiliar environments, new classrooms, new teachers and classmates.

This leaflet offers some quick suggestions and practical advice to all members of the school in order to avoid some of the problems faced when working with children with Autism Spectrum Conditions.

For more information contact:

- The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome (2006) by Tony Attwood.
- Autism: The Facts (2002) by Simon Baron-Cohen and Patrick Bolton.
- Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for Practitioners and Carers (1998) by Patricia Howlin.
- Asperger Syndrome - What Teachers Need to Know (2003) Matt Winter.

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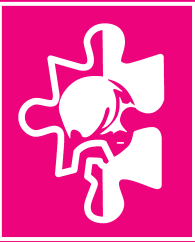
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Autistic Spectrum Conditions



Information for Teachers and School Workers

What to do...

- **DO** speak slowly and clearly, using the child's name to get their attention first.
- **DO** keep your language simple, clear and direct with short sentences where possible e.g. Sam please sit on your chair, Jo please be quiet.
- **DO** ask simple, closed and focussed questions.
- **DO** use visual cues to increase understanding e.g. photos, symbols, writing, drawings, objects etc.
- **DO** allow the child extra time to process and respond to questions. If you interrupt them, they may have to start at the beginning or become overwhelmed.
- **DO** check for understanding as they are unlikely to tell you that they do not understand.
- **DO** ask the parents if there is anything you need to know about their child's anxiety or strategies they use at home.
- **DO** take into account medical issues e.g. people with autism are at a higher risk of having seizures.
- **DO** set aside a quiet area where the child/children can go to have time out if needed.
- **DO** watch out for BULLYING. Children on the autistic spectrum can be bullied for being different. They wouldn't necessarily let anyone know.

DO STAY CALM

What not to do...

- **DON'T** expect the child to sit still in an assembly, as they may find this impossible.
- **DON'T** expect them to understand body language, gestures, tone of voice or facial expressions. Be concrete in what you say.
- **DON'T** use abstract ideas due to literal interpretation. E.g. the expression "pull your socks up" may well lead to the child physically pulling up their socks.
- **DON'T** give choices due to problems with understanding.
- **DON'T** take lack of eye contact as a sign of rudeness or guilt.
- **DON'T** attempt to stop flapping, tapping, rocking, pacing behaviours unless it is essential.
- **DON'T** invade their personal space unless necessary. Restraint should only be used if they are a definite risk to themselves or others.
- **DON'T** ask several questions at once due to confusion.
- **DON'T** shout.
- **DON'T** think they are deliberately being rude or disrespectful if they talk inappropriately or on seemingly irrelevant topics. This is likely to increase in times of stress.

What to be aware of...

Children with autism can be extremely sensitive to specific sensory stimuli (vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, balance and movement). This varies depending on the individual child. It is important to think about the senses when talking to the child.

- **SENSITIVE VISION:**
Turn off fluorescent lights where possible or flashing stimuli.
- **SENSITIVE HEARING:**
Limit the amount of noise in the room e.g. close windows. Don't shout.
- **SENSITIVE TACTILITY:**
Children with autism may have a very high pain threshold and may demonstrate an unusual response to pain, including laughter, humming, singing, taking clothes off etc. They may also find touch painful, so do not touch the child, even to guide them somewhere. They may not tell you if they are injured or unwell so look out for signs.

A child with autism can easily be overloaded with sensory information in busy places, such as the playground. The way in which this sensory overload is dealt with depends on the individual. It can trigger a fight or flight reaction. Some may rock, tap objects, talk incessantly, pace, repetitively question, whereas others might withdraw or place their fingers in their ears. These behaviours help calm the individual so it is very important not to stop these behaviours unless necessary as this may lead to more challenging behaviour.

