

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD sometimes known as Autistic Spectrum Condition)

What is Autistic Spectrum Disorder

About one in a hundred people have Autism. Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that effects how people relate and interact with others as well as how people make sense of the world around us. Autism is a spectrum condition which means it will affect different people in different ways. Asperger's is part of the spectrum where people may have average or above average cognitive ability but may still find understanding and processing language difficult.

The Neurobiology of Autism

Young people with Autism often have unusually rapid brain growth during infancy and early childhood. Young people experience atypical patterns of connectivity between parts of the brain associated with communication and social interaction. Although autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, meaning it comes about through development of the brain (and this is affected by learning and the environment) the current best research indicates that the major causal factors for ASD are changes in specific genes at a molecular level.

Challenges that young people with AS may face and behaviours they may exhibit

- Young people may struggle with engaging or understanding social situations and conversations
- Young people may find they struggle with understanding physical proximity to others.
- Young people with ASD often find interpreting facial expressions difficult
- Young people may have a special interest in something. This can be used as a tool to engage the young person in learning but can also become a difficulty whereby the young person struggles to separate themselves from the interest.
- Young people with ASD find they need order and routine to understand the world. This reduces the level of anxiety they face. Young people may be resistant to change and may enjoy playing the same game over and over.
- Young people may show little or no interest in things that would catch the attention of other children.
- Young people with ASD can find noisy or very busy situations overwhelming.
- Young people with ASD can be fearful of social isolation and can be very anxious about the process of making friends.
- Young people with ASD can be at a higher risk of being bullied due to peers not having a good understanding of the condition.
- Often young people with ASD find processing sensory information difficult. This can make certain sounds, tastes, smells, textures and visual stimulus overwhelming. Young people can be hypo or hypersensitive to a vast range of stimulus.

- Young people with ASD can also struggle with heightened proprioceptive, vestibular and interoceptive stimulation. This will be difficult for adults working with young people to detect.
- Young people with autism (particularly girls) can develop “masking” strategies. This means behaviours that are exhibited at home are often not displayed in school. This can make it challenging for both school staff and the family in understanding the needs of the young person.

Strategies to support young people with ASD

Communication

- Use the pupils name at the beginning of an instruction to gain their attention.
- Eye contact is difficult for some young people with ASD. Figure out what “active listening” looks like for each individual when deciding whether you have their attention.
- Say less and slow down the pace of your voice when needed.
- Try to avoid using phrases such as “Shall we try this”. This may be taken as an option to refuse participation.
- Use key words repeatedly. Having a bank of key words or to support pre teaching of key vocab can be especially helpful at reducing anxiety about new learning.
- It can be helpful to provide new key words not only with a definition but also an example of how that word may be used in a phrase.
- When questioning try to be as specific as possible. “Did you enjoy that task?” is better than “how was your lesson?”
- Limit the amount of body language shown when giving instructions. Place emphasis first on the verbal spoken language used.
- Visuals and examples of completed work can be very helpful at reducing the anxiety a pupil may be experiencing but also in giving the young person an idea of the success criteria you are looking for.
- Consider the sensory input occurring in the classroom. Pupils may need sensory stimulation added or removed. Be aware of the sensory stimulus the young person is dealing with an adjust the cognitive load of learning accordingly.

Classroom support

- Use agreed classroom routines.
- Try to keep items and important objects in the same position within the class.
- Give as much prior warning to the young person about changes to the environment as possible.
- Giving the young person their own workstation can be helpful. TEACCH strategies are useful to employ with this regard.
- Some pupils find visuals really support them in understanding what is going to be happening or expected. Some young people may need a picture exchange type approach to learning.
- Now and next boards could be used. This could be for the individual or presented at the front of the class for everyone to see. Pupils may also benefit from task lists which they can tick off.

- Social stories and consequence or decision mapping are helpful in pupils understanding a range of situations.
- Young people with ASD may need support in understanding why homework is given. In some circumstances it may not be appropriate to give homework. Some young people with ASD view school for school work and home for free time. It can be very difficult to change this thought pattern.
- Some schools find it helpful to conduct simple sensory screening protocols to help them understand what the young person finds difficult to manage in the classroom setting. These can be found online. They can also help schools develop and appropriate sensory diet for the pupil.
- School report teaching all pupils about neurodiversity has a huge impact on young people with ASD being able to confidently interact with their peers in class.
- Keeping a behaviour/feelings diary can help the young person express their feelings and also give the adults involved insight into potential triggers.
- Some pupils will be motivated by their special interest being included in the learning. Be careful not to overuse this though as it can become the focus of inflexible thinking on the part of the young person.
- Develop a “safe space plan” for each young person. Give explicit training in how the young person should use this option. It can help to have a range of interventions available in the safe space that the young person can engage in to support them with regulating.
- Social interaction programs like talkabout, time to talk or socially speaking can be helpful in developing social interaction skills.

Outside of the classroom support

- Structured lunchtime and breaktime clubs can be helpful. Sometimes young people with ASD can be put in a position of responsibility running these clubs.
- Young people with ASD should be consulted on where they would like to spend their break times in order to manage the sensory stimulus.
- Adults may need to support young people at break time to engage socially with peers. Gradually this support can be removed.
- Having a safe space available at breaktime inside and outside is a useful strategy to employ. This could be paired with “buddy” work or evening using student leaders to support social integration.