

What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental syndrome which means there are social and communication differences which affect the way a person communicates and relates to others

What causes Autism?

The exact cause is unknown but research shows that genetic factors are important, and that it is associated with a variety of conditions which affect the development of the brain, either before, during or very soon after birth. It is a life long syndrome and can affect students of all intellectual levels, so students can be anywhere on this spectrum. Students may have a **triad of impairments** in the main areas:

- Communication
- Social interaction
- Imagination

Communication Differences

- Delayed speech
- Inability to sustain conversation
- Can take things literally
- Problems with tone, volume and intonation
- Difficulties with body language, eye contact and facial expression

We communicate 80% of what we want to say through non-verbal actions

Social interaction differences

- May appear insensitive to others
- Interrupt or talk over others
- Talk at length regardless of the listener's interest
- May misunderstand non-verbal actions and therefore appear rude
- Forming and maintaining relationships
- Resistant to change (rely on routine)

Imagination differences

- Lack of empathy
- Problems with decision making or using initiative
- Generalising is difficult
- Cause and effect (scenarios that have not happened are hard to comprehend)
- Inability to organise and plan ahead
- Peer relationships
- Lack of spontaneity

Positive aspects of Autism

Some autistic students will display these characteristics:

- Attention to detail
- Methodical approach
- Be good with facts and figures
- Reliable
- Extremely well motivated
- Enjoy routines

Sensory Difficulties

Every student is different but many have sensory sensitivities, which makes it hard to concentrate and join in activities.

Issues to consider

Taste - Food and drink preferences in terms of texture, colour, temperature and separation of food.

Smell - classroom needs to be fragrance free or students prepared in advance for food or chemical smells.

Touch - be aware of concerns and preferences of different textures and the need to touch/fidget.

Sight - personal space, colours, bright/dull lighting and overcrowding may cause problems.

Sound - noises from staff or equipment or outside factors may need advance warning. Say the student's name first before talking. Allow for more time to process instructions.

Observed Behaviours

Uses eyes to communicate in an unusual way	
Does not show an interest in what others are looking at	
Shows a lack of facial expression, or expressions are out of context	
Apparently not interested in others	
Attends to others too intensely	
Stands too close or too far away	
Has few friends and has difficulty in maintaining friendships	
Prefers to be on the outside of social groups	
Likes games to be organised using either consistent rules or those of their own making	
Tends not to share interests with others, or not to point things out or comments on the same topics as normally developing children	
Offers explanations for their behaviour that show little regard for the needs or interests of others	
Rarely comforts or reassures others when they are distressed	
Finds difficulty in working collaboratively with other children	
Tends not to imitate other children or to pick up the subtleties of peer culture	
Appears older than their real age, owing to an adult manner	
Fails to understand things in the same way as other children	
Speaks in an unusually loud or unusually quiet voice	
Has difficulty adapting behaviour to different audiences; they may use the same manner with their teacher as with peers in the playground	

Has a sense of humour, but does not always share this with others; finds difficulty in understanding other people's humour	
Has difficulty in 'reading between the lines' and understanding inferences	
Gives unlikely reasons for the behaviour of other people	
Has difficulties in planning ahead	
Does not treat other people's feelings or points of view as relevant	
Tends to talk at length about a topic of interest	
Has an overriding interest in an unusual subject, object or person	
Repeats actions, such as foot tapping in class, inappropriately	
Develops repetitive behaviour patterns such as insisting that they always follow the same route to school	
Knowingly repeats disruptive behaviour such as flicking lights on and off	
Has difficulty in getting organised for different lessons	
Has difficulty in remembering what to do when the context changes	
Becomes anxious when there are unexpected minor changes to the day	
Is not motivated in the same way as other children	
Sometimes appears very happy or upset for no apparent reason	
Has an unusually strong reaction if anyone touches them	
Has an unusually strong reaction, such as covering their ears, if someone says a particular word	
Sometimes fails to distinguish between group and individual requests	
Uses particularly clumsy or insensitive attempts to make friends	

Strategies for autism

As previously stated, students with autism have different needs but here are a few basic strategies:

- A set daily routine
- Visual timetable
- Clear instructions ie specific - write two sentences, number your instructions for help with sequencing
- Warn of any changes to routine or activity
- Using clear and unambiguous language, avoiding jokes, idioms and metaphors
- Addressing the student individually at all times (for example, the student may not realise that an instruction given to the whole class also includes him/her)
- Repeating instructions and checking understanding, using short sentences to ensure clarity of instructions
- Using various means of presentation - visual, physical guidance and peer modelling
- Ensuring consistency of expectation among all staff
- Recognising that some change in manner or behaviour may reflect anxiety (which may be triggered by a change to routine)
- Not taking apparently rude or aggressive behaviour personally; and recognising that the target for the student's anger may be unrelated to the source of that anger
- Specific teaching of social rules/skills, such as turn-taking, sharing and social distance
- Minimising/removal of distractions, or providing access to an individual work area, or both, when a task involving concentration is set
- Seeking to link work to the student's particular interests and strengths
- Using word-processing and computer based learning
- Protecting the student from teasing during unstructured times and providing peers with some awareness of his/her particular needs
- Allowing the student to avoid certain activities which he/she may not understand or like, and supporting the student in open-ended and group tasks
- Allowing some access to obsessive behaviour as a reward for positive efforts

Asperger syndrome

While there are similarities with autism, people with Asperger syndrome have fewer problems with speaking and are often of average, or above average, intelligence. They do not usually have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism, but they may have specific learning difficulties. These may include dyslexia and dyspraxia or other conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and epilepsy.

With the right support and encouragement, people with Asperger syndrome can lead full and independent lives.

Characteristics of Asperger syndrome

The characteristics of Asperger syndrome vary from one person to another but as well as the **three main areas of difficulty**, people with the condition may have:

- love of routines
- special interests
- sensory difficulties.

Ten Tips for Teaching Students with Asperger's Syndrome

- 1. Seat the student with a good role model. Remember that these students are keen to fit in and in order to do so they copy other students! Being seated near the door could also help so that if they need to get out they can do so unobtrusively.
- 2. Identify a quiet place that the student could go to if noise levels are either distressing or distracting.
- 3. Before giving an explanation/ instructions ensure the AS student is cued in by saying their name, e.g. "Tom, you need to listen now."
- 4. Remember that the AS student is unlikely to sustain listening or be sure about what to do. Always go over to check understanding and use words like, "Tell me what you have to do" rather than "Do you understand?"
- 5. Write steps in a task either on the board for all to work through or go over to the AS student once the class is settled to recap instructions, jotting them down in bullet format for him / her to work through. Encourage them to tick off/ cross out as done as this shows them where

they are and gives a good sense of achievement. This will be useful for any student who finds auditory learning difficult.

- 6. Use visual learning styles as much as possible.
- 7. Give clear, direct instructions. Do not use indirect language such as, "I am waiting" as this may not be understood. It would be much better to say, "Tom, look at me please." Sarcasm and humour may also not be processed correctly. Don't waste time saying what *not* to do, just state the behaviour that you *do* want.
- 8. When you want them to engage in class discussions ask a factual question. Memory for facts is probably good whereas they are likely to be uncertain about giving opinions or answers about more abstract ideas.
- 9. In the same way, the tasks that suit them best may be the familiar, the highly structured, the factual, and they may need help in ideas and organisation with any open-ended or imaginative task. Mind maps are very useful aids.
- 10. Individual work is probably what they like best, but paired working can be beneficial in terms of both promoting interaction with others and of scaffolding a task. Group work is likely to be very difficult. If you have a TA in the room ask him / her to support the group that contains the AS student. If this is not possible ensure you give clear guidelines for how to work in a group, something that tends to be taken for granted.

Associations

www.autism.org.uk

The National Autistic Society

www.nas.org.uk

www.isn.net/~jypsy

www.teach.com

Book List for Autism

Literature

Autobiography and Biography

Sainsbury, Clare	Martian in the Playground - Understanding the schoolchild with Aspergers Syndrome (How to cope at school)	Lucky Duck
Jackson, Luke	Freaks, Geeks and Aspergers Syndrome	Jessica Kingsley

Useful Texts

Attwood, Tony	Supporting Asperger's Syndrome in Mainstream Schools	Jessica Kingsley
Nichols, Shana	Girls Growing up on the Autism Spectrum	Jessica Kingsley
Kluth, Paula	'You're going to love this kid!' - Teaching Children with autism in the Inclusive Classroom	Jessica Kingsley
Jordan, R & Jones G	Meeting the Needs of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders	David Fulton
Jordan, R & Powell S	Understanding and Teaching Children with Autism	Wiley
Seach, D Lloyd M Preston, M	Supporting Children with Autism in Mainstream Schools	Questions Publishing

Fiction

Haddon, Mark	The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night	Vintage UK
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