

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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What is ASD

It is an umbrella term used to describe a group of developmental disorders including Autism and Asperger syndrome.

A lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them.

Someone with ASD/Aspergers may have the following difficulties

Social Interaction

Difficulty recognising or understanding other peoples emotions and feelings, and expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially.

Social Interaction

They may:-

- Not understand unwritten social rules e.g. they may stand too close to another person or start an inappropriate subject of conversation.
- Appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- Prefer to spend time alone
- Not seek comfort from other people

Social Interaction

- Appear to behave strangely or inappropriately as it is not always easy for them to express feeling emotions or needs.
- They find it hard to form friendships : some may want to interact with others and make friends, but may be unsure on how to go about this.

Social communication

Difficulty with verbal and non-verbal language, many have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say.

Social communication

They can find it difficult to use or understand:

- Facial expressions or tone of voice
- Jokes and sarcasm
- Common phrases and sayings eg wait a minute
- May not speak or have limited language
- Find it hard to understand the give and take nature of conversations

Social communication

- Perhaps repeating what the other person has just said.
- Talking at length about their own interests.

Social imagination

Allows us to understand and predict other peoples behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas and to imagine situations outside of our immediate daily routine.

Social imagination

Difficulties mean that people with autism find it hard to:-

- Understand and interpret other peoples thoughts, feeling and actions
- Predict what will happen next or what could happen next
- Understand the concept of danger eg running into a busy road poses a threat to them.

Social imagination

- Engage in imaginative play and activities: children with autism may enjoy some imaginative play but prefer to act out the same scenes each time.
- Prepare for change and plan for the future
- Cope in new or unfamiliar situations.
- Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination.

Other related characteristics

Love of routines – can often prefer to have fixed daily routines so they know what's going to happen every day.

Other related characteristics

- **Sensory sensitivity** – This can occur in 1 or more of the 5 senses. They are either intensified or under sensitive eg may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. People who are under sensitive may not feel pain or extremes of temperature. Some may rock, spin or flap their hands to stimulate sensation, to help with balance and posture or to deal with stress.

Other related characteristics

Sensory sensitivity – They may also find it harder to use their body awareness system. This system tells us where our bodies are, so for those with reduced body awareness, it can be harder to navigate rooms avoiding obstructions, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out fine motor tasks eg tying shoe laces.

Other related characteristics

Special interests – Many people have intense special interests often from a young age, these can change over time or be lifelong, and can be anything from art or music, to trains or computers. These interests may be unusual eg collecting rubbish, stones

Other related characteristics

Learning disabilities:- May have a learning disability that affects all aspects of their life. There can be different degrees of learning disability, so some will be able to live fairly independently – although may need some support to achieve this – while others may require lifelong, specialist support. However all people with autism can, and do, learn and develop with the right sort of support.

What to do?

If you suspect a child may have ASD then you need to:-

- Seek specialist advice from educational psychology
- Discuss your concerns with parents and ask them to seek specialist help. Eg CAMHS

What Helps?

- Prioritise positive relationships.
- Be dependable and predictable yourself.
- Establish trust and foster a sense of safety with you.
- Accept the diagnosis and likely implications – even if you can't see what you would expect to. Individuals with ASD can be great at camouflage.

What Helps?

- Tailor learning opportunities to the specific needs of the child.
- Identify and offer safe places and safe strategies to facilitate expressions of anger
- Reduce anxiety through predictability, routine, structure and warnings about change.
- Adopt non-confrontational approach to discipline and take time to explain why behaviour is not appropriate

What Helps?

- Consider what cues and rewards the individual responds well to and increase the use of them.
- Awareness of over sensitivities of individuals with ASD and avoid use of harsh criticism, sarcasm and ambiguity that may cause confusion.
- Consider the immediate environment and its effect on any sensory issues – over sensitivity to light, noise, texture and smell etc.