



Understanding Autism

Advice Sheet

Autism is a developmental condition affecting the way the brain processes information. It occurs in varying levels of severity and is a lifelong condition. Autism may affect the way autistic young people communicate with others and relate to the world around them. Autistic young people have a different perspective and may have trouble learning, understanding and interpreting the unwritten rules of social interaction and relationships. It is important to value and develop their particular interests and activities and not to focus on trying to change them; instead try to see situations from their point of view. Try to help them understand the world we live in by explaining and showing as much as you can.



Your child is still the same person as before the diagnosis. Being diagnosed simply provides a medical explanation for why your child has a certain set of strengths and difficulties.

Autism can be a hidden condition, we often only see and judge our young autistic people from what we see on the outside rather on what they feel and experience from the inside. That is why it is so important to get to know and understand the young person and how their autism affects them.

A good way of understanding Autism is by watching and learning from other autistic people. We have attached a handout 'Voices of Autism' so that you can begin to learn more.

Autism is known as a “**spectrum**” because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. However, many autistic people can learn how they view things differently and learn how to cope and live independently as adults.

2 Key Features of Autism

Social and Communication

These might affect a way a person interacts with others in a social situation and how they are able to communicate.

- Meaning they may take longer to process information or have difficulties in reading other people's emotions or facial expressions
- Can take things literally – be aware of how you say things and avoid sarcasm until they have a better understanding of sarcasm



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- Find it hard to form friendships and have conversations
- Appear at times to be insensitive
- May just prefer to spend time alone
- There can sometimes be speech delay and others may be non-verbal
- Can have a lack of eye contact – encourage this don't force it
- Lack of awareness of personal space
- Seem to relate better to objects than people
- May have difficulty with turn-taking and group work
- May find initiating contact difficult, even if they want something. So can get frustrated and angry
- May show at times a lack of empathy / insensitive of others
- **They have to learn the rules through intellect rather than social intuitions or instinct**

Repetitive and Restrictive Behaviour

This is how they experience the world around them, using their imagination and flexibility of thought.

- They may engage in repetitive and restrictive behaviour. Which means they may repeat movements such as hand flapping or fiddling. This could be a way for them to help them feel less anxious and more relaxed or stay focused.
- They can become rigid in thinking and see things in a black and white way.
- The 'What if' in life can be at times challenging for them.
- Autistic people can find change difficult so you may find them wanting to keep things the same, such as routines, walking to school the same way etc.
- They may have difficulty with self-organisation skills, so helping them with routine and structure can offer consistency.
- The world can be a very unpredictable place and this can be frightening and create anxiety for them. So knowing when and what is happening can really help them feel more relaxed and safe.

An autistic person normally will have features in both these common areas to enable them to receive an Autism Diagnosis.



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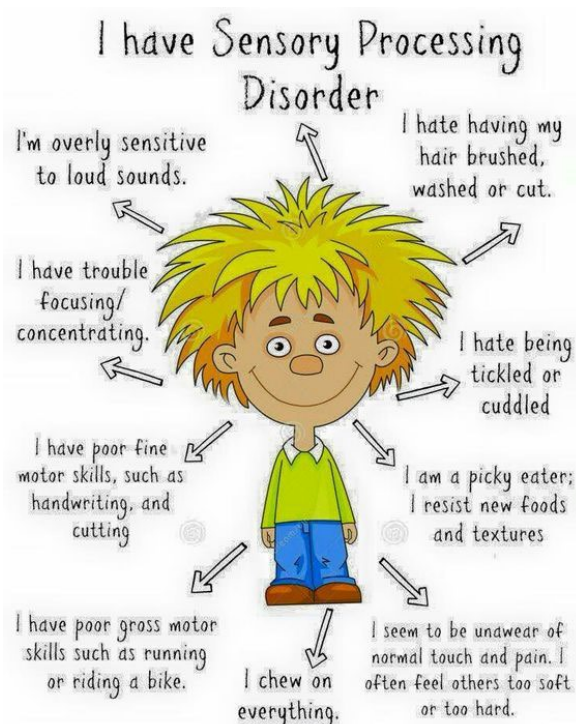
Offer Areas and Features of Autism

Sensory Processing Difficulties

In some autistic young people, the brain has trouble organising and responding to information from the senses. Certain sounds, sights, smells, textures, and tastes can create a feeling of “sensory overload.” Bright or flickering lights, loud noises, certain textures of food, and scratchy clothing are just some of the triggers that can make autistic children feel overwhelmed and upset.

Sensory processing is divided into eight main types:

- **Proprioception** - This is the “internal” sense of awareness you have for your body. It’s what helps you maintain posture and motor control, for example. It’s also what tells you about how you’re moving and occupying space.
- **Vestibular** - This term refers to the inner ear spatial recognition. It’s what keeps you balanced and coordinated.
- **Interoception** - This is the sense of what’s happening in your body. It may be best understood as how you “feel.” This includes whether you feel hot or cold and whether you feel your emotions.
- **Five senses** - Lastly, there are the 5 common senses — touch, hearing, taste, smell, and sight.



What might the sensory processing feel like for an autistic person?

Difficulties with sensory processing can affect every part of a child’s life. This is because our bodies are constantly receiving sensory messages.

Close your eyes for a minute and just think about all of the sensory input you are experiencing.

Do you hear any sounds or smell and scents? Can you feel what you are sitting on? Does your body know whether you are sitting up or lying down?

What about micro sensations? How do your clothes feel against your skin? What about your



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watch or jewellery? Can you sense the seams of your socks or tights? How is the faint tick of a clock sound, or the flicker of a light affecting you?

Noticing micro sensations

Some of you who are reading this may have never noticed these micro sensations before. This is because your brain filters them out. For someone with autism, these micro sensations may be felt with greater intensity. This can often lead to distraction or avoidance. Over time, if these sensations become too much, this can lead to sensory overload. Sometimes this might result in a meltdown or even shut down.

Children that meltdown typically show their sensory overload in more obvious ways than those that shut down. During a meltdown, a child's behaviour will likely be quite intense, it may look similar to a tantrum. However, the trigger for the response is too much sensory information.

It is important to also keep an eye out for shut down as these children can be overlooked. Children who shut down may withdraw, go quiet or try to hide. These indicators of shut down can often be missed.

Often, young people with sensory processing issues are oversensitive. They try to avoid sensations they find unbearable. However, some may seek more sensory input, not less. They may want to touch things and feel physical contact and pressure. They can also be under sensitive to pain and have an unusually high tolerance for it. They may prefer playing rough and not understand if they have hurt someone. Some may be both sensory avoiding and sensory seeking. They may be oversensitive to some sensations, and under sensitive to others. A young autistic person's reactions can change from one day to next, or even throughout the day, depending on the environment or situation.

Anxiety



Anxiety is a normal part of children's development, but children and teenagers on the autistic spectrum can experience anxiety more intensely and more often than other children. It can cause demand avoidance, (PDA), for these young people try offering choice and be aware of the way you phrase instructions. Anxiety can be caused by a huge range of triggers and these will depend entirely on the individual, their likes and dislikes and their past experiences. It can help to get your child to notice anxious feelings and use strategies for managing anxiety, along with modifying the environment. It is important for the child's long term wellbeing.



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Emotional Regulation

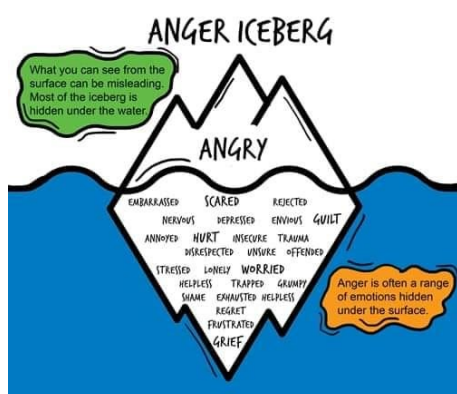
Emotional awareness refers to our ability to identify which emotion we are feeling and the reason for it, emotional regulation refers to the ability to manage and control our emotions as well as our ability to express them. Our autistic young people have difficulty regulating their emotions, telling them apart, choosing the correct emotion and reading the emotions of others. This can make them feel lost, not in control or they can come across as rude and abrupt, not realising the impact they have on others.



The ability to recognise, label and understand feelings in oneself and others is an important skill and one in which our young people will require ongoing teaching in everyday settings. To effectively teach self-regulation, school and parents can adopt the following approach: be warm, accepting and responsive to the child's emotional needs talk about emotions, acknowledge how they feel, support and show empathy to validate their negative feelings, try not to punish or react negatively to emotional outbursts.

Teach them about emotions, we have many additional resources to support you with this, so do ask us to send them to you.

Behaviour



Making sense of the behaviour means making sense of the autism. Trying to understand why they are feeling distressed / frustrated will really help you learn how to amend and adjust your approach and support.

All of the above features can have an impact on an autistic's person's behaviour on how they view things and how safe and comfortable they feel in certain environments.

Some may have an absence of Theory of mind, which means they may struggle with not always understanding that others have a different opinion / feelings to them, or that others may want to do something different to what they want to do. With help and support Theory of mind can improve.



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When unpicking the behaviour consider the following:

- What are you seeing actions / emotions – this then leads onto why? A question you should always ask yourself and does what you are seeing link into their autism. (The features above)
- The setting – look at the environment (lights, noise, temperature, people, place, the task etc.) what are they possible wanting to avoid or feeling overwhelmed by?
- How are they feeling / their emotional state – hungry, ill, anxious, angry, sad etc.?
- Has someone or something made a demand of them?
- Did something happen when they did not expect it to? – any sort of change can possibly cause them distress
- Do they fully understand what is happening, and what is expected of them? Do they know what the plan is, when, how long and where?
- Are they able to visualise or see what the plan is? Using just words isn't enough at times.
- Can they express what they want – this can be more difficult if your child is non-verbal.
- How did you react, what did you do and say? – this is really important to be aware of.

Once you start to analysis the situation and unpick what has happen you can then start to plan and prepare to prevent certain behaviours from happening again.

Rather than trying to change the child (or the autism), try changing yourself (and your communication). Do consider joining a workshop to learn more on what strategies can help our young people. We also have a top tips leaflet with some great ideas that will start to help you learn how to amend and adjust your support.

Autism can come with other conditions:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia
- Dyslexia / Dyspraxia / Dyscalculia
- Tourette's syndrome
- Mental Health
- Epilepsy



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Autistic People have many strengths:

- They can often have a special interest, these can be really helpful to motivate them or even lead to career choices.
- They can have amazing long term memories (short term can be more difficult for them) and can have the ability to recall facts
- They can have high level of certain skills, and can be very smart.
- They can sometimes see the finer details that others may have missed.
- They can be open and honest
- They enjoy routines and will happily maintain those routines with great success
- Many can be very happy with their own company and are not always driven with the need to be social.
- They don't tend to judge others, and are good at accepting of difference

Believe in them, the difference you can make is:

ENORMOUS!

With the right understanding / awareness and support we can help our young people access life as an independent adult and learn to feel safe, happy and make their own positive choices to enable them to become successful individuals. (Success is acknowledge on an individual basis.)

Be open to the future / possibilities, try not to feel too negative and have hope / faith in your child.

Think ahead and plan for success and it is always ok to ask for help.

Website Links:

National Autistic Society

