

Understanding Autism



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 affects the way your child communicates with other people and relates to the world around them. Children on the spectrum 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 solely on trying to change them to become like us, 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.

Common Signs and Symptoms of Autism

Social Interaction & Social Communication

Difficulties in not knowing how to behave and interact with other people, not understanding the unwritten social rules, making it hard for them to create relationships.

Difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication.

Effectively communicating with others at times can be difficult for them. They may have trouble with fully understanding the meaning of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice or what is expected of them. They may need extra time to process information.

Social Imagination

Difficulties in flexibility in thought and / or behaviour. Change can cause distress. There is a need for routine within a world that can be unpredictable. They sometimes find it hard to imagine what may happen next. Children may develop obsessive interests.

Additional Difficulties

Sensory

Some children may have additional sensory sensitivity, learning and physical difficulties. Children with sensory sensitivity may be over - or under sensitive to certain sensory stimulation (sights, sounds, smells etc). This can make the world a frightening and painful place.

Extreme Anxiety

Anxiety can be a real difficulty for our young people and this can cause demand avoidance, and can lead to meltdowns and shutdowns. It is important that we connect with the young person, learn what causes the anxiety and put the right support in place to help with their mental health and wellbeing.

Autism is a spectrum, and how these characteristics reveal themselves will vary hugely. Our children are all different. That is why it is important to get to know them and how best to support young autistic people.



Top Tips for Parents with Children on the Autism Spectrum

Try to take care of your own emotional needs first. Develop yours and your child's resilience.

Observe and become the expert on your child. Get to know and understand how the autism affects your child and the way they see the world differently, what triggers them, what do they find stressful, what helps them feel relaxed and calm. This will really help with solving problems and preventing or modifying situations that cause difficulties. Once you have started to unpick these triggers, decide on the ones you wish to focus on. Pick your battles! Try to let some of them go. If your child or others are in danger then these behaviours cannot be ignored.

Modify the environment – make your child's environment safe and sensory friendly (to fit your child's needs)

Find ways to **have fun** together at least once a day. Play is an essential part of learning for all children and shouldn't feel like work

Communication Tips

- Always say your child's name before you ask them to do something or give an instruction.
- Give shorter instructions (say fewer words) concise chunks are easier to follow i.e., *"Ben, coat on..... shoes on"* or *"Ben, first shoes on, (pause) then go outside,"*
- Leave time for them to think and process each instruction, 6 – 10 seconds.
- Give them time to respond, use the right level of communication for your child.
- Show them what you mean, use visual cues (pictures, the written word) or actual objects to help get the message across.
- Reflect back, check they have understood, *"What are you going upstairs to get?"*
- Avoid asking too many questions – comment more on what they are doing.
- Put together a visual timetable to let them know what is happening during the day, week and month.
- Give choices, this helps your child to feel more in control i.e. *"Would you like an apple or a banana?"*
- Label feelings, help them find the words or show you how they are feeling. This may take time.
- Use timers – let them know how much time they have left, show them if you can by using timers.
- Give them 5 minute warnings. Avoid surprises or last minute demands.

Helpful Websites

- **I CAN** – Supports children with speech, language and communication difficulties. It offers a range of information services that provide help and advice to parents and practitioners about speech, language and communication. www.ican.org.uk
- **The Communication Trust** – is a coalition of nearly 50 voluntary and community organisations with expertise in speech, language and communication. Working together they support everyone who works with children and young people in England to support their speech, language and communication. www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk



Adapting your behaviour to get the best out of your child

- Amending and adjusting your approach is the key, to building positive relationships. Take a step back and breathe! Ask yourself, what is happening, how are they feeling, is this behaviour conscious or sub conscious? How can you work together, to problem solve, build resilience and come up with a list of possibilities to try?
- Praise your child for every achievement, however small. Praising positive behaviour builds self-esteem. For anxious children make the praise more specific *"I really like the way you have done..."* Rather than *"That looks really good"* For some, praise can create higher expectations, leading to more anxiety. Get to know what works for your child.
- Try not to continually correct, praise for trying and show them how to achieve. Being good role models

and providing positive experiences can create positive feelings and positive behaviour.

- Try to avoid the word “No” or words like “Don’t run”, or “Stop running”, – Say what you want them to do rather than what you don’t want them to do. i.e. “Ben, walk”, “Stop!” or “Wait!” on its own is fine and often better than ‘No’.
- Try explaining. If you have to say “No” give your child a reason why and offer an alternative – “Thomas is watching his programme, let’s find you something else to do”.
- Be firm, however try not to shout – limit your responses when you feel your child is feeling anxious, confused or even cross. Any attention can be rewarding, even if it is negative. Show little emotion and speak calmly. Ignore some behaviours if you can.
- Be consistent – have clear boundaries and stick to them. It doesn’t work if you change the rules or alter the approach half way through. Involve all those who are close to your child.
- Learn the art of negotiating – let some things go.
- Keep promises or sanctions. Keep them realistic so you can follow them through.
- Give yourself and your child down time (time out) – everyone needs a break including you!
- **Create a home safety zone.** Carve out a private space in your home where your child can relax, feel secure, and be safe. Encourage your child to go a safe place when starting to feel anxious, cross or angry or just wants some down time.
- Going to their room shouldn’t be a punishment, more of an environment where they can learn to calm down in their own time. Help them learn that it is the behaviour you don’t like, not them.
- Rewards – all children like rewards, however any reward system should be carefully thought about and made individual for each children. What works for one may not work for another.
- Put good routines in place, however always signal changes in advance (the timing of this will depend on your child)

Communication Tips for your young people with extreme anxiety and demand avoidance.

High anxiety can lead to more communication difficulties especially around demands. (Some of the tips above may work, however please be aware they may not)

- Always monitor and observe first how your child is feeling, what zone are they in (Zones of Regulation). Are they open and ready to communicate with you? Are they feeling anxious or overwhelmed or are they relaxed and ok. Try and put yourself into how they are feeling.
- Always be aware when to stop communicating and give them space.
- Keep language simple and try and reduce demands, can you try and change it into a request or choice? Really stop and think about how to best communicate and what words to use.
- Offering Choice is also a good option, if they can’t choose what do you think teddy or someone else might choose? Takes away the demand on them.
- Use phrases such as, “I wonder how we might.....”, “I wonder if anyone can do this?” “Let’s see if?” “If you are happy to?” “I wish I knew someone who could help me with?!” Really look and explore key phrases.
- Be aware of your facial expressions. Individuals with extreme anxiety can be hyper sensitive to tone of voice and facial clues, which can often cause them distress.
- Have a sense of humour! Be prepared to take the mickey out of yourself too!!
- Write it down on post it notes or text them
- Show empathy and sympathy: “I know you find maths really hard. I do too. Shall we work on this together?” Understand and genuinely accept your child’s feelings in response to a situation. Feeling their feelings with them.
- Allow time to process
- Work on their wellbeing, create a wellbeing plan.

Helpful Websites:

West Berkshire Directory - Local Offer

SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

All the information, advice and guidance you need is now in one place

<https://directory.westberks.gov.uk/kb5/westberkshire/directory/localoffer.page?localofferchannel=0>

Children and Young People's Integrated Therapies (CYPIT) Toolkits home page

'Our toolkits have been produced by specialists in the Children and Young People's Integrated Therapies Team. They provide Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Speech and Language Therapy and specialist Dietetic services for children throughout Berkshire.

<https://cypf.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/children-and-young-peoples-integrated-therapies-cypit/>

The National Autistic Society

We are the leading UK charity for people on the autism spectrum (including Asperger syndrome) and their families www.autism.org.uk

West Berkshire Parent Autism Workshops

The workshops give parents the opportunity to meet other parents whose child has received an AS diagnosis. To be able to share concerns and know that they are not alone. Parents can learn new skills, which will empower them to increase their confidence and knowledge.

What are the aims of the Workshops?

- To provide support with diagnosis
- To develop understanding of the nature of Autism
- To address difficulties that may be encountered by parents/carers of individuals who are autistic
- To provide practical strategies to both help and prevent difficulties
- To improve communication with your child

We provide a number of workshops covering many areas, such as anxiety, emotional regulation, sensory, behaviour and many more.

To learn more do contact us and ask to be put on our email updates list which provides information around workshops and other useful topics.



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