

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

The following handout is intended as a brief introduction to Autism and offers some suggestions how to deal with difficult moments, which may arise.

Autism is:

- A developmental condition that is there from birth and lasts throughout life.
- Caused by a dysfunction of the brain.
- A condition that can run in families but can happen spontaneously.
- Diagnosed by using the triad of behavioural impairments.

Underlying difficulties linked with Autism

This is often called The Triad of Impairments and includes:

1. Impairments in SOCIAL INTERACTION

Not knowing how to respond to others. There may be a matter of fact or inappropriate response to emotional situations. Children may have difficulties in adjusting their emotions to fit the situation, with turn taking and with two-way social interactions. They will have difficulties in “putting themselves in someone else’s shoes”, with empathising and in predicting the behaviour or emotional state of others.

- e.g. “why does he laugh when I am crying instead of asking why I feel so sad?”
“why is he nice to me when I wear a red ribbon but not when I wear a blue one?”

2. Impairments in SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

May have a pedantic and literal understanding of words. May be able to ask for their own needs to be met but not able to talk about feelings or thoughts. Will have difficulties with non-verbal communication e.g. using gestures, facial expression.

- e.g. “when he is frustrated he says “the cars are leaving”
“if he wants to play on the slide, he says no more apples”

3. Impairments in IMAGINATION

May pay attention to minor or trivial parts of things rather than seeing the whole. May have problems with organising and sequencing tasks and routines and so need prompting and support. May have difficulties in generalising knowledge learned in one situation into another. May have a fear of change, a need for sameness and routine and have problems using imagination. They use repetitive behaviour to cope with this.

- e.g. “I gave him fish fingers for tea instead of his usual pizza, what a noise he made!”
“I moved the furniture in his room - he went mad!”

Other difficulties that you may notice which are associated with autism and are a result of the above triad of impairments include:

Cognition / Thinking

- Some children have an adult-like intellectual functioning; some children take an interest in topics, which are not seen as being typical interests of children.
- When children with autism are under stress, they often react emotionally rather than logically and have problems thinking through appropriate responses. They may have rages/tantrums, or say inappropriate phrases because of difficulties with self-control.

Generalisation

- People with autism often have difficulties in using their knowledge and skills in different settings and with different individuals and may have problems in learning from past experiences.
- Someone with autism may know how to act appropriately in one situation but may not be able to act appropriately in the same situation involving different people, or in different situations involving the same people.
- Each situation may feel like a new experience for which they may need prompts to remember what to do.

Maturity

- Children with autism often have an emotional maturity that is below what you might expect of a child their age. Particularly during the period between the ages 9 to 19, children with autism may appear to have an emotional maturity of someone two-thirds their age.

Rote Memory (Learning by Heart)

- Rote memory can be thought of as an asset, it can however create difficulties for someone with autism. Because of well-developed rote memory skills, they may give the impression that they understand when in fact they do not. They may be able to recall large chunks of information but cannot use it flexibly or apply it within situations.
- Chunks of information may be stored in memory, but it can be difficult for someone with autism retrieve them. For example open ended questions such as, ‘Tell me what the main character in the story did after his horse disappeared,’ may not get an answer because the child has stored the information under the main character’s name and is unable to make the link from the term ‘main character’ to her actual name.

Problem-Solving

- Children may choose one problem-solving strategy and use it constantly regardless of the situation or outcome. They may not know any others and so not know how to adapt to changing situations; this can lead to frustration and may show in their behaviour.

Language

- Children with autism can have good structural language skills, such as clear pronunciation and correct syntax, (sentence structure), but have great problems in using it in the correct context. Problems can include:
 - Repeating the same phrase over and over.
 - Talking with exaggerated accent, or in a droning style.
 - Discussing at length a single topic that is of little interest to others.
 - Experiencing difficulty in maintaining a conversation unless it focuses on a particular, narrowly defined topic.
- Non-verbal communication difficulties include;
 - Proximity - standing closer, or further away from people during a conversation.
 - Intensely staring at another person for long periods during conversation.
 - Failing to make eye contact.
 - Having an inexpressive face that doesn't show interest, approval, or disapproval in another person's conversation.
 - Failing to use, or understand gestures and facial expressions.

Visual Processing

- Generally we know that people with autism understand information more easily if it is shown to them in a visual way, rather than given verbally. This is extremely important and can help someone make sense of a very confusing world.

Sensory Issues

- Odd responses to sensory stimuli such as, touch, smell, taste, noise, visual information, pain and textures. This can either be an over or under sensitive reaction.

Behaviour

- Behavioural difficulties are often the result of a child having difficulties with some aspect relating to the Triad of impairments such as,
 - A lack of understanding of a social situation
 - High stress levels.
 - Lack of control over the environment and problems coping with change.
 - An obsessive and single-minded pursuit of a certain interest.

Stress and Excitement

- A child with autism may not show stress in the usual way through for example tone of voice or posture. As a result, their agitation may increase to a point of crisis because others are not aware of their discomfort.
- Excitement often causes the same reaction as stress.

Distractibility and Inattention

- Attention can often seem fleeting.
- Social interactions are often distracting for the person with autism. Distractions may occur because they do not know how to filter out relevant from irrelevant information and so attend to everything.

Tunnel Vision

- Having the ability to focus attention on one particular thing while ignoring all others is very difficult for the person with autism

Structure, Organisation and Flexibility

- People with often either have an ability to provide structure for themselves or they totally rely on others to help them organise themselves.
- It is generally easier for persons with autism to function in an organised environment. Predictable schedules and environments help them to cope. Unscheduled events cause the person great discomfort which may be shown by disorientation or difficult behaviour.