

COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION: AUTISM

Autism is a developmental disorder which is present from birth and genetically related. It is a spectrum condition as it can range from mild to severe. It occurs across all cognitive abilities.

It is defined as a triad of impairment:

- Social interaction: difficulty in interacting with others, may impact relationships with peers or adults
- Social communication: difficulty with pragmatics and the social context of language, alongside difficulties with understanding others or speaking with others or in the presence of others
- Inflexibility of thought: also known as 'theory of mind', difficulty in moving on or change, may be obsessive, difficulty in understanding other people's thoughts or feelings or 'stepping into their shoes'

The main facts:

- Autism is thought to affect up to 1% of the population
- It is a neurodevelopmental condition and can only be diagnosed through clinical assessment – by either a neurodevelopmental paediatrician or clinical psychologist (not a teacher or educational psychologist)
- It is a complex condition and should ideally involve a multidisciplinary team to assess
- There are often associated sensory difficulties, but these do not form part of the diagnosis
- It is a spectrum condition ranging from mild (where the individual's difficulties might be missed or misunderstood) to severe (where the individual will require a high level of care and may not communicate verbally at all)
- There is no cure or drug therapy, the most effective interventions are: intensive interaction, Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), Sensory programmes, social communication programmes,
- High functioning autism affects individuals who may appear highly intelligent or knowledgeable in a particular field
- Since it is a life-long condition, it is known as a disability
- There is a high correlation between autism and developing a mental health condition, such as depression, in later life

Other disorders which are considered to be associated with Autism are:

- Asperger Syndrome – considered a high functioning autism
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder – a complex condition with similar difficulties
- Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome – associated with a lack of empathy and theory of mind
- Semantic Pragmatic Disorder – considered a mild form of autism, as the triad of impairment is not necessarily experienced; associated with a complex and disordered language and communication
- Sensory Processing – behaviour exhibited is due to underlying excessive sensitivity issues

The main difficulties associated with Autism:

Main area of difficulty	Things to look for:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aloof and indifferent to people • Appears in a world of their own • Passively accepts the social approaches of others • Active but odd, repetitive and inappropriate, self-absorbed approaches to others • Difficulty or disinterest in making friends • Appears alone in the playground – asks to help the teacher during break • Limited eye contact • Difficulty with sharing • Difficulty in expressing feelings • Difficulty in understanding other people's feelings • Difficulty in understanding that others have a view and their views matter • Difficulty with turn taking • May not enjoy physical contact • May form inappropriate close attachments • Does not appear to learn from mistakes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of a desire to communicate with others • Repetitive speech - echolalia • Age-appropriate speech, but limited topic of interest • Disorganised language • Late to develop appropriate grammatical structures • Does not seem to respond appropriately to gestures of others • Does not obey social rules of communication -may call out in class, talk over others,

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not speak or has a significant delay in spoken language • Takes things literally
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty attributing thoughts, beliefs or actions to others • Difficulty in imagination • Repetitive behaviours, such as lining up pens/cars • Obsessions over unusual things, e.g. Egyptology, Trains • Narrow interests – will not be open to explore other interests • Distressed by chaos and things being out of place • Difficulty in moving from on activity to another – may cause anxiety • Distressed by changes to routine • Rigid diet - will not try new foods • Rigid eating routine • Plays with/fascinated by parts of an object -e.g. the wheels of a car
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hypersensitive to certain stimuli such as noise, touch or light • Avoids certain textures • Avoids certain foods • May become very anxious when wearing certain textures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-occurring difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement and coordination difficulties, which may appear like dyspraxia • Reading or spelling difficulties dues to disordered language • Attentional difficulties • Defiant and oppositional difficulties

Access arrangements in exams

Autism is a complex difficulty, and the associated needs will vary between individuals. It is essential that a thorough analysis of strengths and needs by a multidisciplinary team of education and health professionals is conducted.

It is important that any access arrangements reflect the student's normal way of working, and are based upon what they need; they will vary from student-to-student.

The most common arrangements needed within exams are:

- Reader or reading pen – for poor reading comprehension, accuracy or speed
- Prompter – for poor attention and concentration
- Oral Language Modifier – where there is a severe communication difficulty
- 25% extra time – where rate of working is impacted
- Separate invigilation – for stress and anxiety associated with exams, or for hypersensitivity to distractions
- Rest breaks – for individuals who become tired easily
- The use of a laptop - to aid organisation of writing

Further information and support:

- National Autistic society: www.autism.org.uk
- Child Autism UK: www.childautism.org.uk
- PDA Society: Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome:
www.pdasociety.org.uk