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AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS

A GUIDE TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Autism Working Group





Foreword

I take great pleasure in introducing this valuable guidance for teachers and classroom assistants dealing with children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. “ASD a Guide to Classroom Practice” reflects the Department of Education’s profound and continuing commitment to this area of special educational need. As the Department’s recent Task Group Report on Autism demonstrated, the number of children being diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorders is on the increase, with increasing demands on the educational system.

I sincerely hope that this guidance proves to be a useful and practical resource for all of those who use it.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr John Hunter of the Department’s Education and Training Inspectorate and the rest of the Working Group for their hard work in producing this guidance.

Gerry McGinn
Permanent Secretary
Department of Education



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Section 1

Autism: Knowing the Spectrum

Aims of this Section

This section describes briefly autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and indicates how ASD may affect the child¹ in the classroom.

Key Messages of this Section

At the end of this section you should know something of the core areas affected in ASD and understand that autism is not something an individual has, rather it is something an individual is.

What is Autism?

The Report of the Task Group on Autism² states that:

‘An Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a complex developmental disability that essentially affects the way a person communicates and relates to people. The term ‘autistic spectrum’ is often used because the condition varies from person to person. Asperger’s Syndrome is a condition at the more able end of the spectrum. At the ‘less able’ end of the spectrum is Kanner’s Syndrome, sometimes referred to as ‘classic autism’.

¹ The word child is used to describe the child or young person with an ASD and for convenience the individual is referred to as him/her.

² Report of the Task Group on Autism. Department of Education 2002.

The Autistic Spectrum

ASD is the term used to describe the variables of autism. While there is a wide range of differences among children with an ASD, they share common impairments in the ability to:

- ▶ interact socially and appropriately;
- ▶ understand and use language and to communicate;
- ▶ think imaginatively, enjoy and participate in a range of activities; often shown in repetitive and restricted behaviour patterns.

Children with an ASD also differ in their intellectual abilities. Many have severe learning difficulties and are educated in special schools, while others have average or above abilities and are taught in mainstream schools. Those with a higher level of ability are described as having Asperger's Syndrome or high functioning autism. There is much debate about the differences between both categories and readers interested in further information may find the Recommended Reading List at the end of this section of use.

The following section clarifies the areas of impairment although it is important to remember that they are interdependent and can vary widely from person to person.

1. *Impairments in social interaction can present as:*

- ▶ apparent aloofness and indifference to other people. Pupils can sometimes relate on a simple level to an adult they know well, but not to their peers;
- ▶ acceptance and enjoyment of social contact, but the inability to initiate and maintain it;



- ▶ inappropriate or odd approaches to other people, paying little or no attention to the response given;
- ▶ stilted and overly formal interaction, even in the most able individuals.

In other words, children with an ASD think literally; they find it tiring to communicate and are often confused by the rules that govern social behaviour.

Key Teaching Points

One of the key characteristics of best teaching is remembering that children with an ASD have significant difficulty recognising what others know and think; they do not readily grasp that others have viewpoints.

It is without doubt the most problematic area for these children and will most likely present him/her with difficulties throughout their lives especially in their teenage years. Teachers need to understand that a child with an ASD will not learn social skills casually and it will be necessary to include specific strategies in the teaching lessons and to provide opportunities for the child to use skills in different situations.

Further information is provided in section 3.

2. *Impairments in language and communication can present as:*

- ▶ a wide variation in communicative ability from individuals who have not developed speech to those who have but find difficulty using their language to communicate effectively. Even those pupils with an extensive vocabulary will have great difficulties in using it in an appropriate manner;
- ▶ difficulty with the social aspects of language, for example, turn-taking and timing;
- ▶ impairment of social communication. Pupils often interact in socially inappropriate ways such as shouting out in class,

interrupting adult conversations or constantly asking questions;

- ▶ an inability to “read” or understand the significance of gestures, facial expression, vocal intonation or body language;
- ▶ an inability to empathise with others;
- ▶ a literal understanding of language.

Key Teaching Points

With these impairments, it is essential that the teacher supports the child in understanding the purpose and value of communication. Teachers need to be aware of the problems which they may inadvertently cause by talking at length when giving instructions and by not ensuring that the individual with an ASD understands the purpose of the conversation. The best practice will include a report from a speech and language therapist detailing the child’s communication difficulties and suggested interventions. In general terms, teaching instructions should focus on paying attention, imitating, understanding and using language in play and social settings. Using visual material and prompts will also promote success.

Further information and practical suggestions are provided in section 4.

3. *Impairments in imagination with a restricted range of behaviours, activities and interests can present as:*

- ▶ an adherence to repetitive play activities, often including lining up or spinning toys. Play materials may be used in an unusual manner or the child may become preoccupied with irrelevant detail;
- ▶ engagement in stereotypical behaviour, for example, spinning, rocking, toe walking and making noises;



- ▶ encompassing narrow interests to the exclusion of other activities. These obsessive interests often include dinosaurs, computers, trains and factual information on any subject;
- ▶ difficulty with planning and organisation;
- ▶ difficulty with change in routine. Children may show excessive anxiety or repeatedly ask questions;
- ▶ a lack of appreciation on the part of children of the consequences of their own actions and problems with the concept of cause and effect;
- ▶ a blurred distinction between fantasy and reality.

Individuals with an ASD may be anxious if asked to play with others and prefer to play alone for long periods.

Key Teaching Points

The children with an ASD will have developed few coping skills to deal with situations or factors which cause them stress. Often these children will employ a number of unusual behaviours which will interfere with their ability to learn. Some behaviour may be extreme and challenging. In planning lessons, teachers need to observe the child over a period of time to ensure that they understand the conditions which give rise to the child's stress and behaviour. Best plans include strategies to ensure classroom conditions favour the child, are conducive to learning and are complemented by helping the child to cope with new and varying activities.

Further information is provided in section 5.

Additional difficulties might indicate:

- ▶ sensory and perceptual abnormalities often including over- or under-sensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch or movement;

- ▶ fine motor control problems such as handwriting difficulties;
- ▶ gross motor control problems such as clumsiness;
- ▶ eating, drinking and sleeping irregularities;
- ▶ limited attention span and inability to block out distractions;
- ▶ lack of appropriate eye contact;
- ▶ speaking out of turn or interrupting;
- ▶ over-compliance; the individual is too easily led;
- ▶ anger or aggression when things do not go their way;
- ▶ a lack of organisational skills, for example, many children with an ASD forget important resources needed for a lesson such as books, pens, physical education kit, or glasses;
- ▶ anxiety: unstructured or unfamiliar situations can be difficult for the pupil. The playground, corridors, dining hall or educational outings are common sources of anxiety;
- ▶ a difficulty with managing time, finishing work, handing in or completing homework, or getting to lessons on time;
- ▶ a tendency to compartmentalise their thinking: they may complete the homework but not have regard to the presentation of the work.

Key Teaching Points

The additional difficulties need to be understood by the teacher and adjustments made to the classroom, the noise level, the materials in use during lessons. An awareness of the possible problems of the environment for learning is crucial to ensure the individual with an ASD is at ease and interested.



The following sections address each area of impairment in more detail and offer practical suggestions to help you to include the individual with an ASD into the life and work of your class.

Recommended Reading List

Asperger Syndrome – Practical Strategies for the Classroom: A Teacher's Guide (1998) Leicester City Council NAS publication. ISBN 1899280014.

Autism in the Early Years: A Practical Guide (1998) Cumine, V. Leach, J. Stevenson, G. Fulton press.

Cumine, V. Leach, J. Stevenson, G. Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guide for Teachers (1998).

Attwood, T. Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (1998) Jessica Kinsley 1. 85302-577-1.

Doherty, K & Irvine, S. Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guidance for Schools.

Simon Baron Cohen & Bolton, P. (1993) Autism The Facts Oxford University Press. 0-901485-01-3.

Jordan, R. (1997) Educating Children and Young People with Autism (Guides for Special Education No 10) Paris UNESCO.

Jordan, R. & Jones, G. (1999) Meeting the Needs of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Fulton press ISBN 1853465828.

Hannah, L. (2001) Teaching Young Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: A Practical Guide for Parents & Staff in Mainstream Schools and Nurseries. NAS publication ISBN 1899280324.

Powell, S. (1999) Helping Children with Autism to Learn. Fulton press. ISBN 185346 6379.



Section 2

Key Underpinning Principles

Children with an ASD differ from their peers in a variety of ways, though they may outshine them in particular areas. Many have stronger rote abilities and can do spatial, matching and perceptual tasks with greater ease than their peers. Many, for example, excel at mathematics and science. The task for the teacher is to recognise that the child with an ASD will have a mixed profile of strengths and weaknesses. In the best practice, the teacher will focus on the child's strengths while attending to the learning weaknesses and ideally aim to assist the child to manage or generalise the strategies for himself. In summary, the "**autism-aware**" teacher will:

- develop an interest in and an understanding of autism
- collate information profiling the child's autism and its implications for teaching
- plan an individualised programme focusing on the child's communication, social and behavioural needs and providing access to the curriculum of the classroom
- involve the parents
- ensure all staff share information and are supportive
- evaluate the outcomes of the work in the classroom

Top Teaching Tips

- ▶ Get to know the child as an individual. Understand his autism and assess how it interrupts his learning. Use his strengths to teach new skills.
- ▶ Give the child an opportunity to explain a situation from his point of view. A good idea is to share viewpoints using visual information such as 'comic strip conversations'.
- ▶ Cut down on the amount of language you use when giving instructions. Keep the instructions clear, simple and direct. Avoid idioms. Tell the child what should be done rather than what should not be done.
- ▶ Emphasise routine and structure. Teaching strategies which incorporate visual structure and clarity will be of great help.
- ▶ Set targets that are realistic, attainable and short term.
- ▶ Teach social skills as they do not come naturally.
- ▶ Keep all staff informed of the strategies you are using. Encourage consistency in the implementation of strategies.
- ▶ Establish regular communication between home and school: this is of paramount importance.
- ▶ Do not be afraid to make mistakes, this is a learning process.
- ▶ A calm disposition and a sense of humour are helpful!



Classroom Assistants: Helpful Guidance

Good communication between the teacher and classroom assistant is paramount. The classroom assistant's contribution is very important and he/she should be valued as part of the teaching team:

- The classroom assistant should be fully informed of the classroom planning. It is helpful if the classroom assistant is involved with the classroom planning.
- The classroom assistant should work with the teacher to create visual strategies to develop independence; children with an ASD learn visually, verbal instruction may not be enough to ensure learning.
- A classroom assistant should avoid being 'velcroed' to the child; create opportunities for independence and social interaction.
- It will help the child's self esteem if his/her classroom assistant is seen working with other pupils.
- Cut down on the amount of language you use, especially when you are giving instructions.
- Think about your use of language and how the pupil will interpret it. The child may think literally and in concrete terms.
- Give the child enough time to process information rather than expecting an immediate response.
- Usual strategies for calming a child may not work. The child may need time alone rather than being comforted by another person. If the child has had a bad day it is not your fault; tomorrow is another day!



Section 3

Strategies for Teaching Social Skills

Aims of this Section

This section aims to highlight the social difficulties which you may observe in your classroom and provides practical examples of effective strategies.

Key Messages of this Section

At the end of this section, you should be more aware of the types of social problems a child with an ASD faces in a class of 20+ pupils and be able to employ some strategies to help the child interact and experience a sense of belonging.

The Friendly Social Skills Classroom

Social skills are an area of complexity for children with an ASD. Social interaction with ***understanding*** is an innate ability for most pupils, however, this does not come naturally to those diagnosed as having an ASD. This causes great difficulties for them in social situations such as:

- ▶ interaction with others;
- ▶ codes of conduct;
- ▶ friendships;
- ▶ eye contact;
- ▶ emotion.

It is a pervasive difficulty, affecting all areas of their lives. Consequently social understanding must be taught specifically.

Difficulties with **social interaction** will be most obvious in less structured situations, such as:

- break and lunchtime;
- in the corridor;
- transition between lessons.

Lack of **social judgement** is likely to be most apparent in the following situations:

- Whole class lessons when the pupils with an ASD may interrupt or shout out inappropriately and repeatedly.
- Speaking to teachers and peers in the same manner. Having no recognition of social status.
- Commenting inappropriately on someone's appearance or actions.
- Adhering to set rules in a rigid way.
- Interpreting language in a literal manner.
- Initiating and maintaining friendships may prove difficult.
- Combining or integrating ideas. Understanding that two opposing concepts can be acceptable.

Example

One young man, a member of a conservation club, was dismayed when a lady picked a blossom as a surprise for him. He could not appreciate that a 'nice' lady would damage the environment by picking flowers, and told her so in an abrupt manner. He felt that if she were a 'nice' person she would want to know it was wrong.

It is important, when dealing with situations that arise from lack of social judgement, that the teacher understands the perception of the child with an ASD



and does not expect his/her social understanding to match his/her level of academic ability. Therefore each situation needs to be dealt with individually. Ask, or help the child explore what happened from their perspective. In knowing this we can help them understand the effect it had on others and how they could change their reaction in the future. This does not happen immediately, it requires much practice, as their generalisation skills are limited. Concepts often have to be relearned in varying social situations.

The following are examples of misunderstandings arising from lack of social judgement.

Brendan is a pupil aged twelve in a mainstream post-primary school. He has a classroom assistant.

On leaving class one morning he made a loud comment about the substitute teacher being 'an old bat'. Unfortunately, the teacher heard the comment and reported it to the head of discipline in school. This resulted in Brendan being suspended for two days. When asked about the incident Brendan said that he was trying to make the other boys laugh. He made two errors. He did not judge the teacher's whereabouts before making the comment, nor did he consider the end result of his actions. There was no intent to offend the teacher. Brendan is a very pleasant pupil. This incident reflects his lack of social judgement due to him having Asperger's Syndrome. This led him into trouble on a regular basis.

Another pupil, during lunch break watched his peers participating in rough and tumble activities, which got more and more boisterous. Without a thought John suddenly pushed his classroom assistant to the ground. This was his way of joining in. He failed to see that, from the school's perspective, this is regarded as abuse towards a staff member and a serious breach of discipline.

A strategy that often helps is known as a buddy system. Asking sympathetic peers to guide the pupils with an ASD in social situations that are proving difficult for them, for example,

- ▶ moving to different locations;
- ▶ break and dinner times;
- ▶ organising belongings;
- ▶ group work;
- ▶ time keeping;
- ▶ PE.

Social Skills for Pupils with a Learning Difficulty

Pupils with an ASD and a diagnosed learning difficulty are often misunderstood as having purely challenging behaviour. However, it is much more likely that they have underlying difficulties linked to the fact that they have a diagnosis of autism.

Areas of Difficulty

- ▶ Transitioning between activities and locations.
- ▶ Change of routine (timetable or staff).
- ▶ Sharing.
- ▶ Waiting.
- ▶ Sensory difficulties.
- ▶ Turn taking.
- ▶ Unstructured time (free play, assembly, break and lunch time).
- ▶ Group work.



Understanding the uniqueness of the child with an ASD and implementing individualised visual strategies, is the key to help the child make sense of the world and fit in more easily. This is social skill teaching with strong links to behaviour management. For useful strategies in dealing with these problems please refer to the section on behaviour in this pack.

The “**social skills**” aware teacher is likely to have:

- ▶ a good understanding of the child’s social interaction problems: ***know the things which may upset the child;***
- ▶ established a relationship with the child based on consistency and routine: ***be a friend;***
- ▶ careful planning, using real social situations, to encourage the child to work with a peer partner, in small groups and in whole class situations: ***help the child to communicate with others - exaggerate social gestures and expressions;***
- ▶ considered how to encourage the child to develop his/her ability to understand social interaction, accept change and to ask for help when confused: ***stay near the child when activities are new or likely to cause confusion;***
- ▶ plans to involve others as appropriate, eg peers, other staff and parents: ***plan personal social lessons to emphasise social rules.***

In order to help children with an ASD, it is necessary to observe and assess their social competencies, to decide what skills need to be taught explicitly. Good use can be made of a variety of methods and materials to focus on the child’s social skills needs. These approaches include:

- ▶ the use of social skills stories which can be easily adapted from the strategies developed by Carol Gray and taught by teachers, assistants and parents. Non-readers can access the stories on tape;

- ▶ the teaching of key social skills in all lessons will help the child with an ASD to understand and feel at ease with the social context, eg:
 - turn taking: use visual rules/cues such as objects, pictures or written sequences and practise as a game;
 - accepting change: let the child know if you are about to change an activity, using a visual cue the child recognises and encourage him/her to know that a task can be completed later;
 - accepting a time limit to a task: use an egg timer for younger children;
 - approaching others: use social stories to help the child initiate communication, make a request and finish a conversation; encourage the child to observe how others behave and to follow the example;
 - behaving well: visual rules/social stories can help the child to be quiet. To know when to speak and what can be said by, eg taking him/her repeatedly through a sequence of appropriate behaviours in pictorial form.
- ▶ using peer support can help the child with an ASD to develop his social skills. This requires the permission of the child and his parents and needs careful explanation to the participating peers. This is a most useful strategy during free time and transitions from one activity to another or during school outings;
- ▶ developing a social skills counselling programme: provide the child with 1:1 or small group training for different situations; this is suitable during teenage years when relationships are developing significantly;
- ▶ using circle time and buddying approaches: this approach can be used to assist the child to establish friendships and to maintain these over time; this also encourages the child to join clubs, leisure centres and is a good preparation for life



after school; older children can be encouraged to develop their vocational and functional skills, including recognising dangers, for the world of employment or further study.

For further ideas on assessment procedures and strategies to address social skills issues refer to the guidance materials suggested in the recommended reading list.

Recommended Reading List

Gray, C The Original Social Story Book, Jenison Public Schools. 1-885477-19-8. 1993.

Gray, C Comic Strip Conversations.

Janette McAfee: Navigating the Social World. ISBN 1-885477-82-1.

Barratt, J., Joy, H., Parkinson, A., Potter, M. & Thomas, G. 2001 Developing Pupils' Social Communication Skills. Fulton press. ISBN 1 85346 7286.

Howlin, P. Baron-Cohen, S Hadwin, J. (1998) Teaching Children with Autism to Mindread John Wiley press ISBN 0471976237.



Section 4

Strategies for Teaching Communication

Aims of this Section

This section provides a brief introduction to the language difficulties associated with an ASD and indicates the key factors that should be considered when planning to meet the communication needs of a child with an ASD in the classroom.

Key Messages

By the end of this section, you should be more aware of the important aspects of language development in children with an ASD and be able to consider a range of teaching strategies to facilitate the development of communication in children.

The “Communication-Friendly” Classroom

The problems.....

Children with an ASD show huge variations in their language abilities. Teachers working with these children recognise the difficulties the children have in making progress in stark contrast to their peers; this poses the greatest challenge to the teacher and to parents. In all instances, the child with an ASD experiences subtle difficulties with the understanding and use of language. Many have not developed the necessary skills to initiate communication; they must be taught if the child is to be able to express his needs and to interact effectively.

Some children with an ASD repeat the words and conversations of others; this echolalia can be used to shape the child’s more appropriate language. Many other children with an ASD rarely have difficulty acquiring speech and rarely have articulation difficulties. They often have excellent memories and can acquire extensive vocabularies. Superficially their language appears to be well

developed and this can lead people to over-estimate their understanding of language. They tend to be very concrete in their understanding and use of language. They are often described as having what speech and language therapists refer to as “semantic-pragmatic language difficulties”. However, it is not possible to have this disorder of communication without an underlying social communication problem.

An effective communicator has few problems in language use, understands the rules of social interaction and knows how and when to apply them, eg understanding that one speaks differently depending on the relative status of the person being spoken to. Such individuals are aware of the impact of their utterances on the person being spoken to and will modify speech accordingly. Children with an ASD find this task particularly difficult.

A child with an ASD may experience any of the following difficulties:

- ▶ ***Attending to instructions or explanations*** - this is a particular problem in group settings. The child may not be “tuning-in” to the relevant aspects of the “message” or may be distracted because of the tendency to focus on non-essential details. When the instruction or explanation is longer or more complex the problem is made worse.
- ▶ ***Dealing with abstract ideas or concepts*** - children with an ASD find ideas and concepts difficult to understand because of their concrete and literal understanding of language. Idiomatic speech and metaphors are likely to be interpreted literally, eg:
 - she hit the roof;
 - get your skates on.

They will not appreciate sarcasm or humour for the same reason, eg:

- you’re driving me around the bend.
- ▶ ***Social understanding*** - as noted above, the social difficulties experienced by children with an ASD may affect



their understanding of language. Even if they understand the actual words they may not be able to grasp the speaker's underlying meaning or intentions. This is a particular problem with sarcastic language where the speaker may say one thing and yet will be communicating something entirely different by their non-verbal signals. This makes pupils with an ASD particularly vulnerable to teasing and ridicule, eg teenagers using "*wicked*" when they mean something is actually really good, or "*Oh Brilliant*" when in fact it is far from brilliant.

- ▶ ***Respecting others' viewpoints*** - children with an ASD tend to launch into conversation with others without assessing the listener's previous knowledge of the topic.
- ▶ ***Progressing a conversation from a single aspect*** - a feature of the language of children with an ASD is their tendency to talk around the subject, which often has the effect of making their accounts of events boring, repetitive and at times incoherent.
- ▶ ***Recognising and repairing communication breakdown*** - children with an ASD often do not realise when a communication situation has broken down because they do not recognise the listener's non-verbal messages. They do not identify signs of boredom, confusion, etc. When alerted to a breakdown in communication children with an ASD are unable to alter their conversation to repair the breakdown, eg they might simply repeat exactly the same sentence.
- ▶ ***Casual and particularly temporal aspect of the communication*** - they tend to slip from past to present tense during speaking or writing activities.
- ▶ ***Apparent inattention when spoken to in a group*** - it is thought that this may result from difficulty in understanding fully the question or what has been said. They may try to analyse what has been said or be "buying time" to formulate a reply. They may not be aware that they are part of the group being addressed.

- ▶ ***Dwelling on obsessional interests*** - it is often noted that children with an ASD introduce a favourite topic into virtually every conversation, even when it is inappropriate to do so.
- ▶ ***Inability to ask for help successfully*** - such children may react inappropriately to a situation that is causing a problem; his/her attempts at seeking help are inadequate and ineffective, eg they may mumble to themselves "I have got a problem."
- ▶ ***Literal interpretation*** - children with an ASD may need explicit instructions, they are confused by statements such as:

*Watch the puddles which should read -
be careful not to stand in the puddles.*

- ▶ ***Facial expression and tone of voice*** - difficulty using or interpreting facial expression or tone of voice during conversation.
- ▶ ***Insensitivity to social rules*** - the child does not understand the conventions of social and linguistic interaction.
- ▶ ***Humour*** - many children with an ASD do not develop an understanding of humour beyond the obvious slapstick type.

The best practice.....

In the best practice, the speech and language therapist will provide supportive information and assessment indicating the child's communicative level and suggesting ways to structure the classroom environment to promote language in a variety of situations. The teacher should:

- ▶ use simple language that is concise and clearly understood; provide visual supports where practical; avoid sarcasm;
- ▶ talk to the child directly; praise all attempts to communicate; speak slowly to give time for understanding and response;



- ▶ use familiar words and teach them to ask when they are confused;
- ▶ teach new words in a variety of contexts;
- ▶ encourage the child to listen;
- ▶ accept the child's best verbal efforts;
- ▶ create a home-school communication book for the child who is reluctant to speak or who does not use speech;
- ▶ use simple drawings to encourage conversation;
- ▶ provide opportunities for the child to practise his language skills;
- ▶ with some children who are non-verbal or are reluctant to use speech, provide other means of developing their ability to communicate, eg using physical prompts, pictures or computer programmes to teach communication skills, encourage those communicating with the child with an ASD to adjust their skills, helping the pupil to become an effective participant in talking and listening activities.

For further ideas on promoting communication in the classroom see the recommended reading list.

Recommended Reading List

Nind, M. (1999) Intensive Interaction and Autism: A Useful Approach. *British Journal of Special Education*, 26,2,96-102



Section 5

Strategies to Promote Positive Behaviour and Deal with Challenging Behaviours

Aims of this Section

This section provides an overview of the behaviours associated with ASD and describes some strategies to promote positive interest in learning and appropriate behaviour.

Key Messages

By the end of this section you should be more aware of the particular behaviour problems associated with ASD and be able to use your teaching skills to develop effective management strategies for the classroom. You will realise that many children with an ASD do not exhibit any behaviour problems of significance in the classroom.

The “Autism-Friendly” Classroom: Promoting Good Behaviour

Typically, the child with an ASD will have fewer skills to cope with difficult situations and may have learned a number of unusual behaviours to deal with them. It is important to remember that the child is not the problem; it is the conditions that give rise to them. The challenge to the teacher is to understand what might give rise to problem behaviours and respond appropriately. In some instances, the child may be oversensitive to certain stimuli or may experience anxiety, fears, eating and sleeping problems and may engage in rituals and obsessions or aggressive behaviour to themselves or others. The evidence of research suggests that, where appropriate intervention is established, there is likely to be a reduction in such behaviours. The teenager with an ASD can also expect the usual adolescent difficulties, but may not be able to understand what is happening. What is helpful to recognise is that there are sometimes

other reasons for unwanted behaviours. However, in the classroom children with an ASD tend to react to difficult situations in a number of ways such as:

- ▶ running from their seats or out of the room;
- ▶ feeling anxious of change, shouting or withdrawing;
- ▶ showing destructiveness and aggression.

The child with an ASD does not always respond to the usual forms of discipline. It may be necessary to develop a systematic plan to improve behaviour. A behaviour plan must be based on an understanding of the child's ASD and recognise that the behaviour, in most instances, is an attempt to communicate. To begin, the teacher needs to think of the behaviour as a 'clue' to understanding its occurrence. Behaviours may indicate that something is difficult for the child, he/she perhaps does not understand or his/her autism is interfering with more appropriate behaviours. Traditional approaches to behaviour modification may not work with the child with an ASD, for example:

1. Communication difficulties make it hard to understand 'reasoning'.
2. The child with autism may not be motivated to please others or may be motivated by unusual things.
3. The child may not understand the cause and effect relationship between behaviour and rewards. Similarly, the child is unlikely to understand that the punishment is a consequence of their inappropriate behaviour.
4. The child may not generalise positive behaviour changes from one situation to another.
5. The child may have established routines that may include negative behaviours.



The first step in solving a behaviour problem is searching for the clues. The following questions may help:

1. What are the underlying difficulties that might cause this problem?
2. In what situations, or at what times, does this behaviour occur?
3. How often does this behaviour occur?
4. What does this behaviour mean from the child's perspective?
5. How does the pupil's behaviour differ from that of other children of the same age?
6. Is this a behaviour that is important to change?
7. What might be confusing to the pupil about this situation?
8. What new skill could the child learn to better handle this situation?

WHAT DOES WORK?

1. Identify the problem behaviour and the possible communication intent:
 - ▶ What usually happens before the behaviour occurs?
 - ▶ How does it inhibit the child with his learning?
 - ▶ What are the consequences?
 - ▶ When and where does the behaviour occur?
 - ▶ What else is happening?
 - ▶ Who else is there?

Describe the frequency, intensity and duration of the behaviour incident: this will help you analyse the characteristics of the behaviour and indicate possible solutions.

2. Develop teaching strategies to address the behaviour and ease communication:

- ▶ Talk to the child and his/her parents about his/her behaviour.
- ▶ Analyse the information you have gathered (if serious consult a psychologist).
- ▶ Observe the child and identify an alternative and more appropriate behaviour.
- ▶ Give reward.
- ▶ Provide interesting activities to engage the child.

3. Adapt the classroom to support the child's understanding and sense of security:

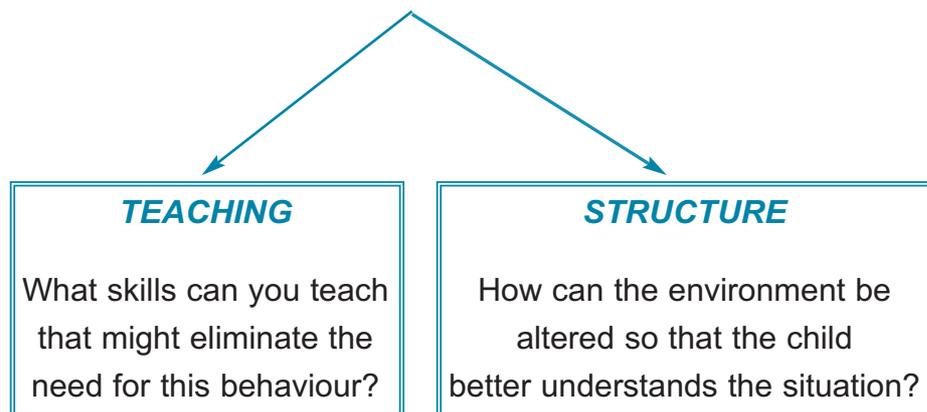
- ▶ Change distracting stimuli.
- ▶ Provide a place for the child to take a break.
- ▶ Offer choices.
- ▶ Plan predictable routines.
- ▶ Introduce calming moments into the class routine.
- ▶ Help the child to manage his/her behaviour by using social stories and shape behaviour toward appropriate outcome.
- ▶ Plan a crisis strategy when things get out of hand and know the triggers which can upset. Never confront the child; offer "time out" space.



- ▶ In more serious instances, develop, with the support of other professionals, a behaviour support plan based on a formal functional assessment which can detail:
 - classroom adaptations;
 - programme interventions;
 - inform further planning.

4. Assessing the behaviour situation

What are the cues that tell you the underlying reasons for the behaviour?



Use strategies and structures to make a situation more visually clear:

1. Use schedules, timetables or calendars that help to show when something will happen.
2. Use accessible pictorial or written rules to remind a child what he/she should do.
3. Physically arrange the classroom to show where something should happen.
4. Provide a checklist using objects of reference, photographs or a written list to help the pupil follow directions independently.

The above strategies are essential to planning and will benefit those children who do not have an obvious behavioural difficulty. The inclusion of the strategies in classroom practice will assist the development of social and communication skills.

5. Replace inappropriate with appropriate behaviours:
 1. Teach the child to communicate; in difficult situations, for example, the child needs to be able to ask for help, to take a break, to express emotions such as fear or anger.
 2. Teach social skills, which will help the child initiate, sustain or escape anxious social situations, such as going to a quiet place, completing a calming activity or using relaxation techniques.
 3. Teach specific play and leisure skills which might occupy his interest.
 4. Develop behaviour targets which shape the child's behaviour toward more appropriate behaviour.

For further information on behaviour strategies see the recommended reading list.

Recommended Reading List

Connor, M 1998, A Review of Behavioural Early Intervention Programmes for Children with Autism. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 14,2,109-117.

NAS publication (2001 revised) *Words Really Hurt Me: How to Protect your Child from Bullying*; ISBN 1899280162.

Smith Myles & Southwick, J. (2001) *Asperger Syndrome & Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Temper Tantrums, Rage & Meltdown*. Autism Asperger Publishing Co. ISBN 096725 1435.

Whitaker, P. 2001, *Challenging Behaviour and Autism; Making Sense and Making Progress* NAS publication. ISBN 1899280510.

Wolberg, P. J. 2002, *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism*. New York Teachers College Press.



Section 6

Anecdotes and Addresses

Nursery

Peter was in his second year of the nursery. At the finish of an outside play session, the teacher would blow a whistle and the children were told to freeze and then to walk to the line. Peter would freeze and walk carefully to the line. The other children would run or walk quickly to the line getting there before Peter. Peter would then throw himself down on the ground screaming and kicking because he was last.

The teacher found that she had to be flexible in changing her ideas and rules: after all, she can be flexible, the child with an ASD cannot!

Key Stage 1

John looked forward to going swimming with his class every week. At the end of the session, the class was given some free time to play but were not allowed to jump in the pool. John got out of the pool and was running to jump in when the teacher stopped him and told him off for jumping in. As a consequence, the teacher told John he would not be allowed to go swimming the following week.

John stomped off, refused to get dressed and delayed the school bus for an hour. When he calmed down he was able to say, "but I didn't jump in" True, he hadn't actually jumped in and from his perspective he was being punished for something he hadn't done.

The ASD child can be so literal in his interpretations. He also may not realise or understand that sometimes you can foresee what the child's actions are going to be.

Useful Contacts

Education and Library Boards

- a. The Special Education Support Team, Autism Support Team. Field Officer for ASD North-Eastern Education and Library Board. Tel: 94-482302 ask for Janet McCann.
- b. Autistic Spectrum Difficulties Support Services. South-Eastern Education and Library Board. Tel: 028-4461246 ask for Kate Doherty / 028-91813613 ask for Glynis McSorley.
- c. Autism Advisory Service: Southern Education and Library Board. Tel: 028-90 38351120 ask for Rosemary Harpur: referrals to Dr Clare Mangan; 028-37512200.
- d. Autism Spectrum Disorders Advisory Service: Western Education and Library Board. Tel: 028-71272870 ask for Caroline O'Hara team leader/Nick Tomlinson or Alison Greer (referrals through Special Education Department WELB Omagh).
- e. Oakwood ASD Advisory Team (Belfast Education and Library Board). Tel: 028-90605116 ask for Ros Millar or Frances Stewart.
- f. PAPA Resource Centre. Tel: 028-90401729.
- g. PEAT. Tel: 028-28298226.
- h. National Autistic Society. Tel: 0161 9987860.
- i. Irish Society for Autism, Unity Building, 16/17 Lower O'Connell Street, Dublin 1, Tel: 00353-071744684.
- j. Aspire - the Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland.



- k. Websites
- www.autismconnect.org
 - www.asperger.org
 - www.deni.gov.uk
 - www.autismni.org
 - www.peatni.org
 - www.iol.ie/~isal/
- l. Department of Education reports
- A Survey of Provision for Pupils with severe and Profound Learning Difficulties in N.Ireland (Section 7) 2002.
 - A Survey of pupils with Asperger syndrome 2002.
 - Report of the Task Group on Autism, 2002.
- m. The Report of the Task Force on Autism ROI, 2002.

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