



Classroom and playground: support for children with autistic spectrum disorders

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Introduction

This booklet is aimed at teachers and school staff with little or no experience of working with children who have autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). The booklet is divided into two sections, one concentrating on classroom strategies and the second focusing on playground issues.

The strategies are also covered in point form for ease of reference.

What is an autistic spectrum disorder?

Children with an ASD have difficulty in three areas

- communication skills
- social skills
- flexible thinking, leading to difficulties in areas like imaginative play.

ASD is used as an umbrella term to include children with a range of diagnoses such as autism, atypical autism, high functioning autism, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD).

Some children with ASD might also have difficulty in processing sensory input. This might affect their sense of touch, smell, vision, hearing, proprioception and vestibular sensations.



Proprioception provides feedback about bone joint pressure. This provides the body with information about how to react appropriately to the surrounding environment.

Vestibular sensation provides the sense of balance and is important for maintaining body posture.

There are theories that some of the unusual behaviours we see in autism, such as aversion to textures, motor planning difficulties and self stimulatory behaviour could be due to difficulties in sensory perception.

Because the number of boys with ASD far outnumbers girls, we have used 'he' throughout this booklet.

How does ASD affect students in the classroom?

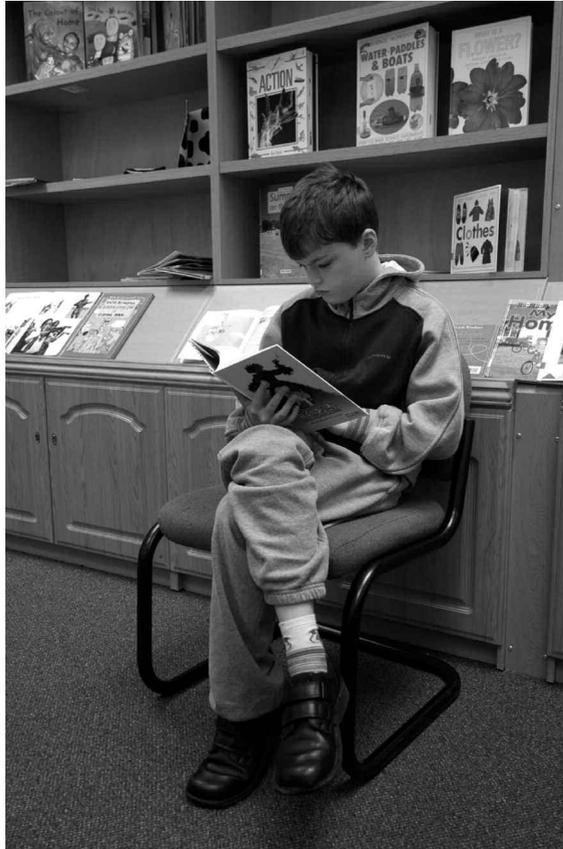
Difficulties in these areas mean that children with ASD might have problems with understanding and following instructions. The child may appear to cope with language but this could be because the child is following situational or contextual clues.

For example, when you say ‘bring your coat’ as an instruction to the whole class, the child may not have understood the instruction. However, he brings his coat because he copies the other children.

Perhaps the child has learnt the routine through exposure and repetition, so lining up provides the contextual clue in this situation. The same child may not respond to the same instruction in a different context, such as when everyone is sitting down.

The child may understand simple commands but may have difficulties with long or complicated instructions.

Most children with an ASD also have difficulty in shifting their attention from one activity to another. They need time to process the given instruction. Repeating the instruction may not help such a student. This just adds more information that needs to be processed. This may cause more frustration for the child.



Because of this, children may follow some instructions, while being unable to follow others. They may also follow them at some times and not others. Due to this inconsistency, teachers may feel that the child is being naughty or is choosing not to do something when he is capable of it. But as explained above this is not necessarily so.

Communication difficulties of children with ASD

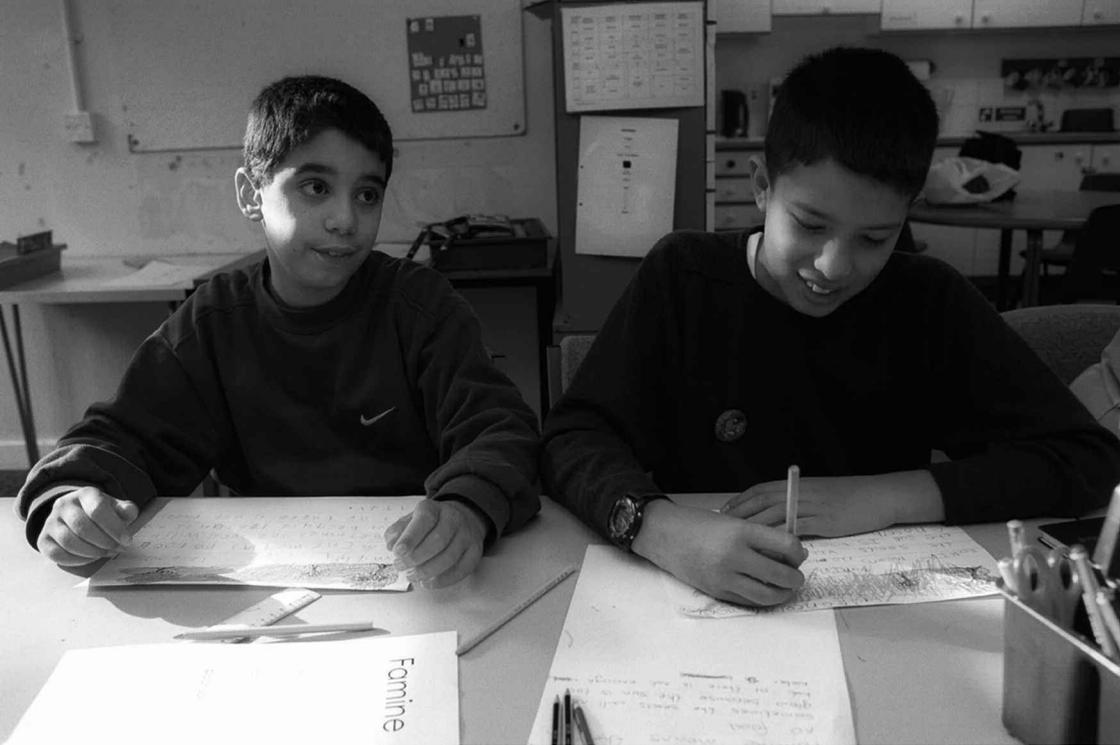
Children with an ASD may have difficulty explaining their needs or answering a verbal question. If the words or question structure is changed, the child might have difficulty in answering, despite knowing the answer.

Children with an ASD also find it difficult to retell an incident or event. Some children might not be able to relate to stories or topics which need imagination. They may also want to relate the stories in more painstaking detail, being unable to sift relevant from irrelevant information.

Yet other children with ASD will be able to talk about their favourite topics at length – like dinosaurs and space ships.

While talking about their favourite topics, children with ASD may ‘talk at’ people rather than ‘talk to’ people. They may seem indifferent to other people’s interest or expect the listener to ask set questions for them each time the subject arises.

Children with ASD often understand language literally and do not understand implied meanings. With phrases such as ‘would you come and sit here?’ a child with an ASD may think that there is a choice and answer ‘no.’



Similarly they find it difficult to understand body language and implied meanings, such as facial expressions and raising your voice when you want them to stop doing something.

Children with ASD may tune out of background noise, especially when concentrating on something, and may appear selectively deaf. Saying their name before providing instructions or asking a question can help them to tune back in.

Classroom rules

Due to their difficulties with social skills, children with ASD may find it hard to follow classroom rules or display socially appropriate behaviour. Some may not understand the concept of personal belongings. They may use other children's possessions or enter their personal space without permission. They could also be unaware of the feelings of other people, and the effect of their own behaviour on others.

On the other hand, due to the unpredictability of the world, some children might want to follow the rules rigidly and might get distressed by changes in routine. They might also become dependent on certain adults, peers or objects in order to cope with this. Some children get very anxious and may display inappropriate behaviours as a sign of anxiety.

Difficulties with social skills

Developing play skills

Following the rules of a game is not easy for a child with ASD. They may have difficulty in using learnt skills in a new situation, with new material or even a new person. Due to their sensory dysfunction, some children may resist certain activities or situations such as playing with sand, gluing activities or playing games involving physical contact.

Children with ASD may find it difficult to attend to a directed task. Some children also find it difficult to concentrate on more than one piece of information at a time. So social situations where they have to read the non-verbal communication such as body language and also listen to what the speaker is saying could be very difficult for them.

How can I help a pupil with ASD in my class?

- Make sure you get the child's attention before you give instructions. You could call the child's name, go close to the child, tap on the shoulder – but be aware that the child may find touch aversive – or use an agreed signal to gain their attention.
- People with an ASD learn better when they 'see' things. Try to include demonstrations, activities and pictures in your lesson. Be careful to find realistic pictures as they might not be able to relate to unrealistic pictures. Visual timetables and supports are very helpful in preparing them for changes and explaining information.
- Use simple language, not complicated words. Try to use a visual clue or symbol along with the words so that the instruction is easier to follow.
- Avoid non-literal language such as metaphor, sarcasm and idioms. Make sure that you say what you mean. At the same time, spend time teaching the meaning of idioms and metaphors. The child may like to compile a glossary of the commonest terms they struggle with.
- Provide time for the student to process the information after you have given an instruction. A general guideline is counting to ten in your mind after giving an instruction. This usually provides the

student adequate time to understand what has been said.

- When introducing a new topic or teaching an abstract concept such as grief or mourning, try to make the lesson more explicit by relating to the child's experiences or providing the child such an experience.

The golden rule is to proceed from concrete to abstract.

- Try to reinforce a new topic in as many situations as possible. Children with ASD might find it difficult to generalise a learnt skill or to apply a known skill in a new way. For example, if you are teaching addition, teach the child to add with objects, numbers and finger counting. Additions should be vertically as well as horizontally.
- It is important to give the child a quiet, distraction-free learning area. Too many pictures, bright colours and noise could be difficult for some children to cope with. Similarly if you are using pictures to teach, try to avoid complicated pictures or pictures with too much information. These could be difficult for the child with ASD to understand.
- Provide the child with clear consequences for rule-breaking. Remember that time out can be rewarding and so could reinforce a behaviour rather than act as a punishment.

- Have consistent classroom rules and routines so that the pupil with ASD understands the behaviour expected in a particular situation. Make sure that these rules are explained explicitly through visual means.
- Visual timetables provide a structure to the child's daily routine and the child knows what is going to happen, reducing anxiety. This helps the child to focus on the learning process.
- Spend time helping the child to develop social skills and to understand the feelings of other people.
- There are a number of ready-made strategies available on the market, such as Social Stories™ and comic strip conversations. A Social Story™ is a story that explains the social situation to the child from their perspective and provides strategies to deal with that situation.
- Comic strip conversations help the child to understand other people's perspective of a situation.
- You can also develop some of your own strategies.
- Make sure that you include the views of the family so that the developed social skills are socially and culturally appropriate in both the situations.

- In spite of these strategies, some students might find it difficult to sit still in a class for long periods of time. They might need some space and physical activity to burn their energy to be able to concentrate on their work.

Behaviours and needs of pupils with ASD vary from one child to another, as with any child.

A strategy that has worked with one child in a particular situation may not work with another child. Or for that matter even with the same child in a different situation!

Teaching is a dynamic, two-way process. It is not just the pupil with ASD who will learn. You as a teacher will improve your skills if you are sensitive to the needs of children with ASD.

Take these suggestions as a starting point and then follow your instincts. The best way to make an autism friendly class is by placing yourself in the pupil's shoes and looking at the world from their perspective. Reading personal experiences of people with an ASD can also help you develop this insight.

Enjoy the journey!

A quick guide to an autism friendly classroom

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication and language skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in understanding and following instructions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Get the attention of the child before giving instructions. ● Use simple language with visual prompts. ● Provide time to process the information. ● Use activities, demonstrations and pictures.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication and language skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in explaining their needs or answering a question. ● Difficulty in retelling an incident. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide visual supports to help in communication and recollection of personal experiences. ● Use closed questions rather than open ended questions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No concept of personal belongings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Spend time in developing understanding of the concepts of private and public. ● Use visual prompts to support this.

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social skills and flexible thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in following classroom rules, and socially appropriate behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have consistent, explicit classroom rules. ● Use Social Stories™ to explain the social rules and expected behaviour.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social skills and flexible thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finds it difficult to deal with sudden changes, leading to anxiety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give advance notice of any changes. ● Use visual timetables. ● Give clear rules and consequences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flexible thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in understanding the feelings of other people and the effect of their own behaviours on other people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work on understanding emotions. ● Use strategies such as comic strip conversations, and mind reading etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flexible thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in relating to a story or topic that requires imagination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach a new concept from concrete to abstract. ● Relate to the child's experiences.

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flexible thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in using a learnt skill out of the learnt situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach each skill in all the possible contexts and in different ways. ● Include generalisation as part of teaching every topic/ concept.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sensory perception and flexible thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Resistance to certain activities or situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prepare for the change. ● Introduce to sensation gradually. ● Provide other options if the student cannot overcome the sensory difficulty. ● Introduce new sensory experiences using the child's interests, eg messy play making aliens to get used to slimy texture.

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sensory perception and social skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finds it difficult to concentrate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give a distraction free learning environment. ● Reduce the social demands while learning. ● Permit time out if child is becoming over-stimulated.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social skills, flexible thinking, and communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in developing play skills, and following game rules. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify and focus on teaching necessary play skills such as turn-taking, negotiating etc. ● Simplify the game rules. ● Introduce a circle of friends or buddy system to help the child in building relationships.



Playtime and the playground

Difficulties in the playground

Lunchtime and playtime are difficult periods for many students with ASD in mainstream schools. All the difficulties that the child faces within the classroom become more prominent in the playground.

The playground is like a mini laboratory where a child's full range of social, communicative and imaginative skills are required to survive.

Unstructured time can be very anxiety provoking and the noise/ bustle of a playground can be very intimidating for children with ASD.

Due to their difficulties in social skills, some children with ASD may find it hard to follow playground rules.

Some may not have the concept of personal belongings and could use other children's possessions or enter their personal space.

They could also be unaware of the feelings and emotions of other people and the effect of their behaviour on others.

Children with ASD may not have adequate communication and social skills to approach another child and initiate a game with them. Children with an ASD often use inappropriate behaviour such as snatching another child's toy to start a chasing game.

On the other hand, due to the unpredictability of the world of the playground, some children might want to follow the rules rigidly and may get distressed if there are any changes in the routine. Just as in the classroom they could also become dependent on certain adults, peers or objects to cope with this. Some children are very anxious in such situations and this may show itself as inappropriate behaviour.

Developing play skills and following the rules of a game is not easy for a child with ASD. Children may have difficulty in using learnt skills in a new situation, with new material or even a new person.

It is sometimes difficult to know whether a person with ASD wants to interact during the lunchtime/ playtime or not. Schools should try to create options and provide opportunities for the student to learn to play in the playground. That way, if the child still chooses to play alone, at least you know that it is a genuine choice.

Making it easier in the playground

You may have to work outside the playground on the basic play skills like turn-taking, understanding rules and negotiation.

The ideas in this section of the booklet are more about creating the right atmosphere for the student to interact and cope with lunch breaks and playtimes while they are learning these skills.

Guardian angels

Many primary schools assign their Year 5 or 6 students the responsibility of looking after the vulnerable children in the playground. These mentors could have special names such as guardian angels, mentors or playground cops. They could wear a special hat, sash or badge so that other children are aware of their role.

The pupils chosen for mentoring will need training to understand their responsibilities. These could include maintaining general playground discipline or helping children with no playmates to engage in some kind of play activities.

This mentoring could help both the vulnerable students and also develop the confidence of the mentors themselves. This also means that the responsibility of looking after children is shared across the school.

Friendship stop

A specific bench or area in the playground could be identified as the 'friendship stop'. A signpost or board could indicate the purpose of the friendship stop. Any child who does not have a friend to play with can go to the friendship stop and then playground support assistants can set up a game to help the child with ASD to interact with other children.

If your school already has guardian angels, they could be trained to monitor the friendship stop as well.



Buddy system

This is the first step for the setting up a Circle of Friends.

Here the teacher chooses some children in the class to be special buddies for the student with ASD during the free time. It will be important for the teacher to spend some time with the whole class explaining about the strengths and difficulties that every one has and how it is important to help someone who may need some support at certain times without undermining their strengths or abilities.

When choosing the buddies for the pupil with ASD make sure that you also take the preference of the pupil into consideration. Otherwise the pupil may resist being with the buddy.

Limit the number of buddies. A good number is five or six children. This will provide the child with ASD as well as the buddies a bit of variety, while providing opportunities for natural friendships to build up.

To make the buddies feel special they can be given a special buddy badge or cap or sticker.

Specify the ground rules about being a buddy. For example, asking the ASD child's permission before helping, listening to the needs of the child with ASD or seeking the help of an adult in case of any problem.

Be careful that the buddies do not start feeling burdened with the responsibility.

The buddy system can be very effective in Key Stages 1 and 2.

Circle of friends

This is the more formalised version of buddy system. Here again the strengths and needs of the pupil with ASD are explained to the whole class and then volunteers are invited to be part of the child's circle of friends.

With some children it might be better not to have the ASD pupil present during this initial meeting. But do make sure that you inform the ASD pupil that the class will be discussing them and trying to help them.

Usually pupils in the class are very keen to volunteer. Again make sure that the size of the circle is not too big. An ideal size will be six to eight children.

If the class bully volunteers to be part of the circle, let him. You have won half the battle already.

Once the circle has been formed, the teacher will have to conduct weekly meetings where the circle, along with the ASD child, will come up with strategies to help. A circle of friends is usually a short-term project and the facilitator should slowly start taking a back seat so that the formal meetings can be reduced after about ten weeks.

The ultimate aim is to help the child to develop natural friendships from the circle and for the other students in the class to understand the nature of difficulties that the ASD child faces.

Lunchtime clubs and quiet areas

For some children going out and playing in the playground could be too overwhelming. They may need a quiet zone in the playground where they may spend some time away from the activities.

Quiet areas can also have some structured activities that the ASD pupil can participate in as some ASD children find unstructured activities difficult to cope with.

With older children, lunchtime clubs can be set up. These are concentrated around the areas that the student is interested in eg computer or music club. This kind of club can provide a chance for the pupil with ASD to excel in what they are good at and share their knowledge with other children with similar interests.

Remember that it is always important to have a 'give and take' element in a normal friendship, and having a group of people with similar interests will also make the student feel more accepted.

In spite of trying all these ideas, some students with ASD may not want to be part of any kind of social group and may need time to be by themselves as they find social interaction too demanding. Allow the student the independence to do this. Since you have tried to develop friendships you can also be sure that it is their choice.

Some children may also prefer helping teachers set up for their lessons or prepare the material. If this is possible in your school, it could be another option.

All these ideas benefit not just the student with ASD but a range of other students in the school.

References and recommended reading

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- * *What did you say? What do you mean? An illustrated guide to understanding metaphors*, by Jude Welton, illustrated by Jane Telford, Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2004

- * *Challenging behaviour and autism: making sense – making progress*, by Philip Whitaker, The National Autistic Society 2001

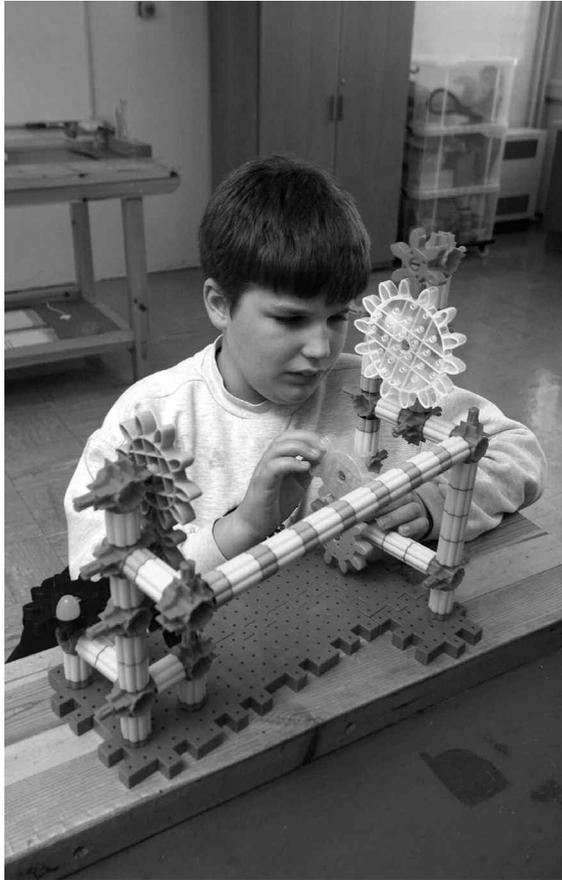
- * Available from NAS Publications
Publications: 020 7903 3595
Email: publications@nas.org.uk
www.autism.org.uk/pubs

Useful websites

www.teacch.com

www.thegraycenter.org/

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/



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