

AAIS Early Years Tier 1 ASD Awareness Training

Session1: What is ASD?

This is the first in a series of video clips from the Education Authority's Autism Advisory and Intervention Service 'Tier 1 ASD Training' programme.

In this first video, I hope to explain to you what Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is, and how it impacts on teaching, learning and on school life.

As you listen to the training, you may wish to think about a child with ASD that you work with and consider your child's strengths, areas of need and what support may help them succeed.

In the second video I hope to explain to you the strategies we can use to make our learning environments more ASD friendly, for children with a diagnosis of ASD.

So, what is ASD? The National Autistic Society describes Autism as "a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them."

ASD is a 'spectrum' condition, which means it can range from mild difficulties to severe disability. Historically, diagnoses included two separate conditions known as Autism and Asperger Syndrome, but nowadays, the one diagnostic term 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' is being used for individuals who share similar characteristics.

When a child has a physical disability, their needs are usually more obvious and support is usually quickly put in place. Please be mindful though, ASD may not be an obvious condition, but we still need to understand the needs of children with ASD and to support them.

There are common misconceptions about ASD and some of the key facts to remember, are that ASD is not contagious, it cannot be attributed to '*poor*' parenting and we do not yet know what causes ASD.

This graph is taken from the document 'The Prevalence of Autism in School Age Children in Northern Ireland 2020'. The statistics collated by the Department of health, show a 3% increase in the prevalence rate of ASD over the past ten years. These figures suggest it is highly likely that every teacher will teach a child with ASD. Consequently, it is important that every teacher and every member of the school team has a sound knowledge and understanding of ASD, and knows how to support each child.

So, what are the common characteristics of someone with ASD?

Just like us all, every child with ASD has unique strengths and talents and will experience different challenges. There are, however, similar characteristics associated with ASD and historically, a child with this diagnosis would have exhibited challenges in three main areas:

social interaction, social communication and flexibility of thought.

This was known as 'The Triad of Impairments'. In recent years, however, some diagnostic changes have been made.

In 2013, the 'triad' was revised to become the 'dyad of impairments', sensory sensitivities have also been acknowledged for the first time and the diagnostic term 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' has replaced the discrete conditions of Autism and Asperger Syndrome. We will now look at each of these areas associated with ASD in turn...

At times, children with ASD can experience challenges in communicating with others and understanding what others are trying to communicate to them. This will impact hugely on every aspect of school life.

Usually, even before a person uses words, they speak to you with their eyes. Some children with ASD however, may find it difficult to use appropriate eye contact.

Children with ASD often report that it hurts to look into the eyes of others. It is important to expect the child with a diagnosis of ASD to have some challenges in this area. We should never insist on eye contact and remember they will still be listening to you even if they are not always looking at you.

Expressive language difficulties can be common in children with ASD. This can lead to frustration and anxiety as the child with ASD may struggle to make his or her needs known to others, or to communicate how they feel.

The language ability can range from preverbal, to the use a few words or phrases, whilst others have developed exceptional conversational skills, and may appear formal in how they address others.

Receptive language can also be a challenge. Many children with ASD will need longer to process auditory instructions. If someone asks a question, they will need longer than typically developing children to think. If the thought process is interrupted, they may need to start processing from the beginning again. Words are like steam and often evaporate away, before the child with ASD has had time to make sense of them.

Often they may speak with an American or English accent.

Some children may also exhibit something known as echolalia or a repeating of words and phrases. They can remember very quickly and easily what they see and hear, and can remember huge chunks from movies, television programmes and adverts almost verbatim.

A child with ASD may interpret instructions literally so you need to be mindful of using sarcasm, idioms and metaphors, and to be explicit, clear and concise when giving out verbal instructions. For example, it is probably not a good idea to give an instruction such as 'Go wash your hands in the toilet!' You may find the child with their hands in the toilet!

A common response when asked 'if they are listening', will be 'No', Or if asked 'if they would like to line up for outdoor play' and refuse. They are not being rude...just honest! They are simply giving what *they* believe to be, a legitimate answer to a legitimate question.

Some children with ASD will say it 'as it is' and not always have a social filter. Sometimes they will unintentionally say things that hurt others feelings, even though they don't mean to.

Children with ASD may have difficulty in making connections and building relationships with others. They often see others as being there to meet their needs rather than for building emotional and social connections.

Non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expression can help typically developing children to understand how others feel and what they may be thinking. Children with ASD may have difficulty picking up on the subtleties of non-verbal communication. They may not distinguish between happy and sad faces, or pick up when someone is getting bored or impatient. Children with ASD can often give inappropriate responses to certain situations. For example, when they see someone cry or fall over, they may laugh.

Social skills are something that most people take for granted. Social interaction can be challenging for children with ASD, as they find it hard to interpret the actions and intentions of others. People can wrongly assume the child with ASD does not want to have, or is unable to make friends. Their understanding of friendships is limited; they may dislike 'sharing' their friend, may not understand it is possible to have more than one friend, and may think that others are their friend when they are not and therefore can be easily lead.

Children with ASD can have difficulty understanding their role in a group. They may feel overwhelmed or move away, or sometimes can be dominant and want to take control.

Where other children will quickly learn to raise their hand or to say excuse me, the child with ASD may interrupt repeatedly, hit others, or move your face in their direction in order to gain attention.

Often children with ASD will like to talk about a topic of interest. They find it easier to talk about their knowledge, but find two-way conversation difficult. They may have limited ability to take turns, listen and answer questions impacting on the two-way flow of conversation.

The concept of turn taking and waiting can be challenging. They may struggle to see others' perspectives, and understand that if they wait, they will get a turn.

They may have difficulty coping with losing a game and understanding that it is okay to lose. This links to the challenge of understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, impacting on their ability to empathise and to understand the perspective of those around them. This can lead to conflict and frustration.

Children with ASD can have difficulty transferring skills from one setting to another, for example, they may use the toilet at home but not in school, a restaurant, Granny's house etc.

Most children with ASD respond well to a routine, but can become very upset in response to unexpected changes, such as a different teacher, indoor break due to bad weather, or when the dinner menu has changed unexpectedly.

The world of autism can be extremely black or white; right or wrong. Children with ASD can have a strong sense of fairness and justice. They can become frustrated when others don't stick to the rules or follow their agenda.

Play skills in children with ASD may appear immature. Play is not always purposeful, may lack imagination and can be inappropriate. For example lining toys up in a particular sequence, spinning parts of toys, mouthing objects or casting items to the ground. They may play the *same way* with the *same* toys every day.

Children with ASD can act in an impulsive manner without thinking fully of the consequences. They may have difficulty linking cause and effect and this may need to be taught and reinforced frequently.

Children with ASD can also feel anxious and sometimes 'stim' when they become stressed. Stimming behaviours can include rocking, spinning, flicking their fingers or making noises. These can help the child calm down

and regulate their senses. These stereotypical behaviours are most often seen when they are anxious, over-excited or over-whelmed.

As well as the widely recognised five senses, recent research findings indicate we should give consideration to an additional three senses.

- Proprioception: This sensory system tells you where your body is in space through feedback from joints, ligaments and muscles.
- Vestibular: This refers to movement, balance and orientation in space.
- And Interoception: It helps us to identify the internal physiological state of the body for example thirst, hunger, body temperature and emotions.

Click on the link to view the video, created by the National Autistic Society, in consultation with children with a diagnosis of ASD. The video linked is a simulation, and from it, it is hoped, you will get a sense of the everyday sensory challenges that children with ASD face as they go about their everyday lives.

The school environment can trigger and increase sensory sensitivities. A child with ASD may have to regulate their senses before they are able to focus on anything else or be able to learn. Certain noises, textures, smells, lights and temperature, or the anticipation of these triggers can cause anxiety. For example some sounds might be unbearable, such as the buzz of the strip lighting, and can cause the child with ASD to feel physical pain.

In relation to smells, be mindful of things like your own use of perfume, or perhaps drinking coffee or eating strong smelling foods before one-to-one teaching or small group activities.

It is also important to bear in mind that some children with ASD may not tolerate any touch. Even a friendly tap on the shoulder might cause a child with ASD unbearable pain or anxiety. On the other hand, some children with ASD may find deep pressure relaxing but need to know what is appropriate and what is not.

Labels and seams on clothing and textures in the classroom may cause discomfort and may impact on the ability to concentrate and focus.

Food issues may arise due to sensitivities with textures, taste and smells.

Sensory issues can also impact on self-care tasks such as toileting and hand washing.

Children may always be on the go due to proprioceptive challenges and unable to understand their body in terms of space.

Poor fine and gross motor skills can also be an indication of an underdeveloped sensory system.

Difficulties such as settling to, and remaining asleep throughout the night, can have a significant impact on the child with ASD.

Limited self-care skills and toileting can all impact on the child and these will need to be taught explicitly to aid independence.

Children with ASD may prefer what is known as the 'beige, carbohydrate' diet. Chicken nuggets, sausages, toast or particular brands of bread or burger baps and cereal, can be common favourites.

A lack of a sense of danger and heightened anxiety can also be common.

It is important to appreciate strengths and to celebrate their differences. Research shows that many children with ASD are visual learners and learn best when information is presented visually. Honesty, technical skills, creativity, determination and reliability are among the many qualities that they bring to school life. By capitalising upon their strengths, you can bring out the best in the child with ASD. Children with ASD may think outside the box and can come up with creative solutions. Noteworthy people with ASD include Satoshi Tajiri, creator of Pokemon, climate activist Greta Thunberg and Anne Hegerty, 'The Governess' from the Chase with her incredible general knowledge and strong memory skills. Another significant person with ASD is Temple Grandin. Temple followed her passion for cattle and is now a Professor in Animal care at Colorado University. She has written many autobiographical accounts and an excellent book "*Thinking in Pictures*".

"Each child is unique - no 'one size fits all.' In addition to knowing about ASD, it is essential to become familiar with the individual characteristics of the child."

It is important that we think of and plan for the children with ASD in our learning environments.

Our second video will help you to plan to meet the needs of your child effectively.

Finally, in the words of Temple Grandin, "The world needs all types of minds...I am different not less."