

AAIS Tier 1 ASD Awareness Training - Primary

Hello and welcome to this autism training session for *all primary school staff* who work alongside pupils in *Primary 3 through to Primary 7*.

This training session aims to:

- increase your understanding of the characteristics of pupils on the autism spectrum
- and help you adapt existing teaching and learning approaches to incorporate the strengths and the needs of your pupils with autism.

Autism is much mentioned on the news and in the media, but how much do you actually know about it? Let's find out...

There are many people from all walks of life who have autism. Can you identify these celebrities? They each have a diagnosis of autism.

A Scottish singer who shot to fame in 2009's Britain's Got Talent TV show - that's Susan Boyle.

A TV quiz expert on 'The Chase,' nicknamed 'The Governess.' - Anne Hegerty.

And finally a BBC Naturewatch presenter. He first appeared on Children's TV in 'The Really Wild Show.' - yes, that's Chris Packham.

You see, it is not always easy to tell if somebody has autism just by looking at them.

Whilst there has been much research done on autism over the years we are still very much learning about it.

Autism is *not* an illness or disease. It's a way of being that affects a person over the course of their lifetime.

For some it may mean having behaviours that are scarcely observable, right through to those who may exhibit great social and communication disabilities.

However, we are hugely aware of the numbers of school age children who currently have a diagnosis, therefore, you may well have one or more autistic pupils in your class.

Whilst boys currently outnumber girls diagnosed, this may well be a changing feature in years to come.

Our perceptions of autism have changed over the decades .

While since the dawn of time there may always have been autistic people, it wasn't until 1943 that an American psychiatrist Leo Kanner first used the medical term 'autism' in describing a small group of young children who had little spoken language, and who did not socially engage with others, who were focused more on objects than on others and had a liking for sameness, yet they showed strengths in visual tasks.

By 1944, Austrian paediatrician Dr. Hans Asperger from the University of Vienna, wrote about a group of older children in his clinic whom he described as his little 'absent-minded professors' who showed advanced interest and knowledge in systems and how things worked, despite their social awkwardness and difficulties in social understanding.

By 1979 an English Psychiatrist, Dr Lorna Wing, defined autism as a 'spectrum' of disorders whereby autistic people share a 'triad' of impairments or 3 common difficulties in communication, social interaction and social imagination. This in turn has been simplified to a 'dyad' classification of social communication and social imagination and is used today when assessing children for autism.

However, in this more recent era of greater acceptance and equality, autistic people ought to be embraced fully within society, whereby we value 'individual strengths' and 'celebrate difference'.

Here are some ways that autism is interpreted.

"Autism is a difference in the way the brain processes experiences, information and sensory stimulation and there are strengths and talents associated with this..."

"Autism is just a word, a box, that holds a bunch of different behaviours and potential struggles inside it (sensory issues, anxiety, struggling with social skills etc.)"

and *"Autism is a descriptor to describe how a person experiences life and what skills and abilities they have."*

It is important to consider the 'whole' pupil and the strengths that they very often display.

Very often autistic pupils demonstrate strong visual skills; this is something that we can use and support their learning with.

They often display strong ability in technical activities such as the use computers, iPads and devices.

If they are interested in an area, they can display an amazing focus, so much so, that at times, nothing can distract them.

Whilst every autistic pupil may have a different profile, as we have said earlier, they share 3 common characteristics:

- A different or more extreme way of ***interacting with others and responding to others***
- A different or more extreme way of ***thinking, learning and behaving***
- or being affected by sensory stimulation and sensations,

However, as Luke Jackson, in his thought provoking book describes it, it's as if every autistic person has different settings.

This therefore creates a 'spectrum' of variation in that some autistic pupils may appear more social than others, or have different tolerance levels of situations, or have more sensory sensitivities than others.

Having autism and potential social struggles does not simply mean that a skill is missing. It may also mean that a feature is there in abundance too, for example being overly chatty, or overly familiar or overconfident, as well as self-effacing or uncomfortable around others.

Indeed a child with autism whilst appearing to show little empathy towards others, may well be overly worried about how an object feels, like a lost ball or a missing teddy.

Don't expect pupils with autism to always arrive at the same meaning of something as you do. For instance if the door bell rings you might instinctively understand that somebody is at the front door and you go to see. However autistic pupils may find it really difficult to understand how the context of a situation may change its meaning.

The world around us can feel like a confusing place if we don't get the full picture of what is happening or understand the unwritten rules for how we respond to situations that arise.

Many autistic pupils may have difficulty tolerating challenging situations such as trying new school work or facing a feared situation.

Many will over react to threats of uncertainty or challenges to their self-esteem when they don't get their own way, or don't win a game or don't get their choice or turn at something . We need to teach and reward the effort of a task, rather than just thinking that learning is solely about completing a task perfectly.

If only he could just write something?... If only she could just stop fidgeting?... If only he would play without arguing with others?... If only she would do her homework and hand it in?... and so-on. If our autistic pupils are either not conforming to our expected classroom behaviour, or are extremely well behaved in class, then they are possibly responding to demands in fight or flight mode, and might be missing the emotional resources to come up with alternative ways of behaving! Just asking, 'How do I get him...?' Implies using a threat or force to comply.

The question is not 'How do I get him to do such-and-such...?' But rather, 'what can I give him to help him to do the task...? What resources does he need? Most likely, relief from anxiety!

Many autistic pupils are over and under-sensitive to sound, sight, smell, taste and touch. They may put their hands over their ears when classes are too noisy. or have a very low pain threshold when they fall and hurt themselves in the playground. However, in addition, we now know that 3 other senses impact our nervous system:

- The Vestibular sense, or sense of balance.
- The Proprioceptive sense - knowing where our body is in space. For example when the alarm clock went off this morning - did you have to see where the alarm clock was to switch it off or did your hand instinctively hit the snooze button without you even opening your eyes or knocking over the glass of water sitting beside the clock?

- And the Interoceptive sense (or internal sensations) - such as hunger, over-eating or not knowing when you are full (in my case, just one more choccy biscuit please!), needing the toilet, or feeling a sense of calm or unease and so on.

Many autistic pupils crave deep pressure sensations, for example squeezing tight or getting into tight spaces, self-stroking, or rocking sensations to calm themselves and to de-stress.

Click on the link to view a super-short film showing us, from an autistic pupil's perspective, the effects of too much sensory stimulation.

For more Sensory information, check out the Children and Young People's Services Training Programme for 2020-2021, details later.

Now pause this presentation to view a revealing short animation from 'The Amazing Things Happen' Project. It's a great little summary of what autism is! Again, just click on the link.

So let's look now at how we can actually help our autistic pupils and learn from them.

If we are to show more understanding of our autistic pupils, then we need to forecast what is likely to disturb them and make adjustments in advance.

We will now consider some simple adjustments to the classroom, playground, or in the lunch-room, that can make a big difference to our pupils.

In the classroom there are many social situations that may cause our pupils distress, such as knowing how to start their work, tolerating sensory noises, sensations like sitting for a long time, trying work when it is hard, coping with making mistakes or not getting everything marked right, fear of the teacher or if other pupils don't keep the class rules.

There are so many things in the dining hall that our pupils have to contend with, such as the numbers of people in close contact, noises, smells, tastes of foods, liking their cutlery set in a certain way or tolerating how food is served etc.

The playground, with so much noise and other pupils running around freely, can easily overwhelm our autistic pupils. Social

demands such as 'how do you know how to join in a game or chat with friends?' can cause great distress.

Visual timetables are essential good practice in the classroom for all pupils. They are not an optional extra. They help all pupils read a situation and plan for action.

They can support pupil independence by:

- Developing structure and routine
- Helping with the transition from one task to the next
- Building on visual strengths
- and by Reducing anxiety

Priming autistic pupils about 'changes' to the expected routine is vital. If you have a visual timetable up in your classroom, please keep it up to date and refer to it throughout the day, for example: **first** maths, **then** sensory breaks.

Many pupils also find it hard to focus in class, or complete tasks and remember instructions. Visual tools help to break work down into manageable chunks to aid active learning and the independent completion of tasks.

Sometimes we might need to temporarily limit the amount of work that a pupil sees, to help them stick at a task, for example, folding a worksheet in two.

Also, too little *visual* information on how to go about a task can frustrate an autistic pupil. We may unwittingly assume that a pupil knows how to organise themselves and start their work when in fact they actually don't know how to, or are too anxious to start a task and so take their cues from those around them. Often, telling autistic pupils what to do isn't enough. Remember *seeing* is believing!

Make use of many types of visual reminders to help pupils organise their time, their learning, and their belongings more effectively.

How many times do some of our pupils go home without their homework or their PE bag or their lunch-box or leave their jumper behind. Visual reminders are the resources that we can give our pupils to help them behave appropriately.

When you give instructions, keep them short and clear. Too often we adults put question words into instructions. As soon as you do that, the instruction can become a question in our autistic pupils' minds, that they may well answer out, for example "Will you please sit down?" to which the logical answer from a child might be "No!"

Also, your autistic pupils may not pick up from your tone of voice or body language that you are becoming irate with them.

Focus on what you want the child to do rather than to stop doing -

"P4 walk quietly along the corridor, thank-you."

"I would like you to speak quietly / use helpful words etc."

Avoid ultimatums - no more "Jamie do you want to get outside today for break-time?.... then you need to get those sentences finished!"

No - when praising a pupil, praise the effort that they have succeeded in, rather than just for getting all their work done. It makes a difference about how they feel about themselves. So instead of "Good boy Sean for getting all your sums right", say "Sean I love the way you can add those numbers together today."

Sensory breaks are activities to do throughout the day in the classroom, to help lower pupil anxiety and distress.

Sensory breaks are a way for any pupil to rest and reset their focus and attention, as well as to calm their bodies and minds.

The school environment is a very anxious and stressful place for our autistic pupils. They need periods throughout the day to enhance their mental well-being.

Introduce *slow* deep breathing, and deep pressure activities into the classroom timetable throughout the day.

To demonstrate the speed of the breathing required - let's try a deep breath together. Breathe in for 4 - 1,2,3,4, hold, hold, out 2,3,4,5,6. That's just one example.

Our autistic pupils find it very difficult to understand people's thoughts and perspectives in a given situation. Using a cartoon strip is a very pro-active way to debrief a situation or unwritten social rule. In this example, Joshua, an autistic pupil, literally answered out loud the teacher's rhetorical question, which then got

him into quite a bit of bother with Jamie afterwards! The thought bubbles give insight to explain why the individuals in the scene responded the way they did.

Writing stories that explain a social situation and the appropriate responses, are very useful for autistic pupils. Unlike other pupils, they may not readily tune in to the social clues around them or innately pick up in clues of how to respond and behave. In other words, these types of story help autistic pupils learn what to do (and what not to do) when faced with unfamiliar life situations.

The playground is often a chaotic and noisy space that places intense social and sensory demands on our pupils. Therefore, formulate a plan to make the experience a more autism friendly event with structure and purpose.

When rewarding the autistic pupil, reward them for using a specific effort or tolerating skill and not simply for being a good boy or girl!

Every autistic pupil needs a champion to support them - will it be you? Be inspired! Take time to learn from a past champion - Rita Pierson. You'll find a link to her TED talk that accompanies this video.

For further online autism training check out the Children and Young People's Services Training Programme for 2020-2021.

On behalf of the Primary Team here in the Autism Advisory and Intervention Service, thank-you for taking the time to access this autism training resource.

We trust it will deepen your understanding and support for the amazing autistic pupils you meet each school day.