

Autism Spectrum Disorder – ASD

A miniature guide



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What is autism?

- A neurodevelopmental condition and a lifelong developmental disability.
- Autism is a spectrum, which means it affects people in different ways.
- More than 1 in 100 people are affected.



Autism Spectrum

People have tended to view autism as a sliding scale along a line like this:

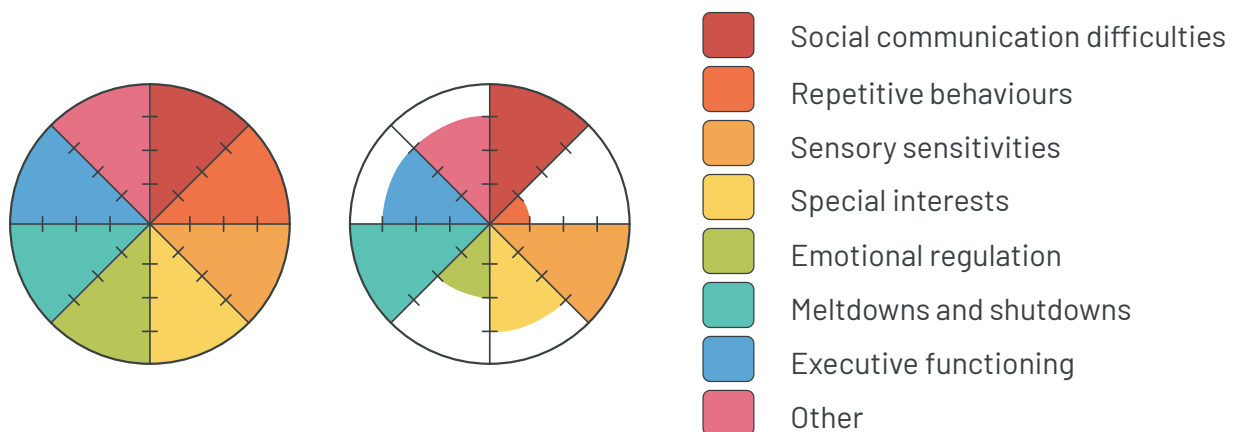


Less autistic

Very autistic

However, the spectrum is **NOT** linear.

It can more helpfully be thought of like this:



Terms like “high functioning” & “low functioning” are harmful and outdated

Here are some of the traits people with autism may share:

Social communication difficulties

- Verbal and non-verbal language. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have great difficulty with speech, while others may speak well, but struggle to understand sarcasm or different tones of voice.
- Autistic people may need more time to process information or answer questions. This may manifest because of Auditory Processing Disorder.
- They might take things literally and not understand abstract concepts, such as idioms.
- Some autistic people need to repeat what is said to them (echolalia).
- It can be difficult for autistic people both to recognise the feelings and intentions of others and to express their own emotions. This can make them appear insensitive.
- They often need to spend time alone and can feel overwhelmed by other people, especially in large groups.
- They can have behaviours that seem 'strange' or socially inappropriate.
- They may not like to be comforted by others and can find it difficult to form friendships.



Repetitive behaviours

- To an autistic person, the world can be very unpredictable and confusing. They find comfort in routines and predictability, so they know exactly what to expect. Changes of routine can be very stressful and distressing.
- Autistic people might repeat movements – such as rocking, hand-flapping, twiddling, and twirling etc. (stimming). These movements can be calming if they are feeling anxious but may also simply be enjoyable.

Sensory sensitivities

- Over-sensitivity is known as *hypersensitivity*.
- Under sensitivity is known as *hyposensitivity*.
- Autistic people may struggle with sights, sounds, touch, smells, and tastes to varying degrees. For example, background noise can be a common problem for children in school and make concentration much more difficult.

Special interests

- Many autistic people have intense and highly focussed interests. These can change over time or may not. They can become experts in a topic and often love to share their knowledge. Special interests can be very positive and bring a great deal of pleasure, but they can also mean that other important parts of life are neglected.



Emotional regulation

- Recognising triggers and finding coping mechanisms is vital, however, it can also be very difficult for autistic people to recognise and regulate their emotions.
- Anxiety can have a detrimental effect on many autistic people, often impacting their quality of life. Over a third of autistic people have severe mental health issues, including depression.

Meltdowns and shutdowns

- Meltdowns happen when an autistic person becomes completely overwhelmed. They might lash out physically or verbally (often at themselves) and can be mistaken for temper tantrums, especially in children. This can be very difficult for all concerned. The child will most likely be confused and upset and their parent/carer may find lack of public understanding means some people can be judgmental and hurtful.
- Shutdowns may seem more passive because the autistic person may retreat 'into themselves' and go completely quiet, but they can also be completely debilitating and intense for the person experiencing them.



Executive dysfunction

- Executive function is controlled by the frontal lobe of the brain and concerns our ability to plan, to use our working memory, to control impulses, to be flexible according to different situations, and to monitor tasks and actions.
- Executive dysfunction describes a variety of related difficulties that are caused either by a neurodevelopmental disorder (such as autism) or as the result of a frontal lobe injury.

Is autism more common in males?

More males have been diagnosed with autism, especially in childhood, but this is thought to be because of the underdiagnosis of females, rather than any real difference in the genders.

Females tend to develop compensatory adaptive behaviours and coping strategies which mask their symptoms. They are also often misdiagnosed with another disorder such as depression or anxiety.

Co-morbidities

- **ADHD** There is a high co-morbidity rate with ASD (somewhere in the region of 50%)
- **Gastro-intestinal disorders**, can include IBS
- **Mental health issues** such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders such as ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)
- **Sleep disorders/disturbances**
- **Hypermobility/Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome**

What support strategies can be used?

Ensure the learner has personal space, with a minimum of distractions.	Try to keep to a routine as much as possible. Prepare the pupil well in advance for any changes in routine to avoid unnecessary distress.
Use a daily visual timetable and visual task lists.	Be direct and clear about what you say. Explain idioms and figures of speech.
Allow the use of quiet fidget toys.	Use visual and concrete materials to support understanding of concepts and conceptual vocabulary.
Allow movement in class.	Only call on those with their hand up to answer questions.
Use games and activities to teach social interactions like turn-taking.	Create sensory spaces for learners to explore or have some 'time out' in.
Avoid timed tasks if possible. Think of alternative ways as this can cause unnecessary stress.	Give one or more examples of what a completed task might look like.
Give visible reminders of something that needs to be done, such as a ribbon tied around a child's wrist.	Provide one-to-one support if/when possible.

What resources are most useful?

Timetables

There are many timetables available to buy, or of course you can make them.

Familiarising children with school schedules allows them to understand what is coming up and reduce anxiety. If they like, children can remove the tiles as each session or activity is completed. Illustrations are helpful for some children. Some children might also like the timings to be displayed.



Timers

These are very useful, especially for children who either will get so engrossed in an activity that they need to know when to stop, or for children who may not want to concentrate for as long and need to have a clear end in sight.



Privacy boards

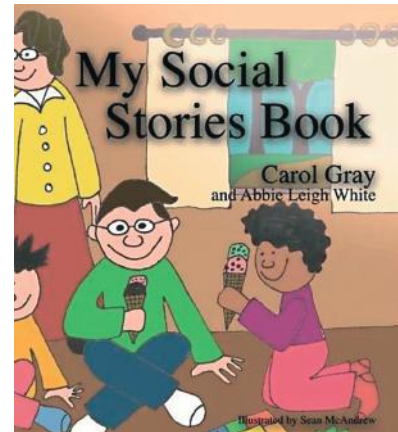
These can help to reduce sensory distractions for some children and help them focus on what they are doing.



Social stories

These were developed in the early 1990s to help children understand social situations and behavioural expectations. Ideally, they should be quite short, illustrated and personalised as much as possible. Many children enjoy seeing photos of themselves and/or familiar people and surroundings in the stories. The stories should be read repeatedly to encourage understanding.

This is a brilliant book by Carol Gray, who popularised this approach. There is a large collection of downloadable social stories at [Social Stories | SEN Resource Source](#) which may be bought individually or in bundles. You can also ask for a personalised story made to your requests, which could be very helpful.



Self-assessment emotion indicators

This idea can be simplified or altered to suit individuals, but is a visual way for children to indicate how they are feeling and whether they need more support. A must-have for non-verbal children, but also for anyone who might find difficulties in expressing how they are feeling or in asking for help.



Ear defenders

These are particularly useful for children with autism and sensory processing issues. They can help block out unnecessary noise, which can relieve anxiety and help concentration. There are no speakers in them, they are simply ear protectors.

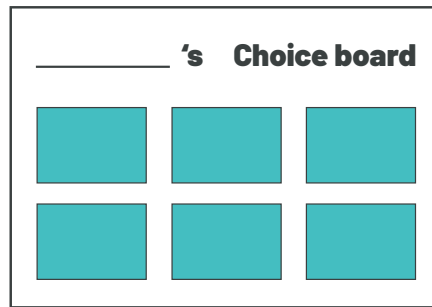


Task sequence instruction strips/ First – then sequences

These are like the timetables, but they break individual tasks down into small steps.

Choice boards

As each task/activity is completed, the next one may be chosen.



Dark dens and sensory pods

These can be a useful alternative to a sensory room and may be used as a safe space for children to be alone and to self-regulate.



Other Considerations

Create a calm classroom

Reduce noise. The classroom can be a very difficult place for children who are particularly sensitive to sounds. This can be alleviated by having carpeted areas and placing felt pads under chairs and tables.

Visual stimuli. Make sure the décor is not too overwhelming. Very busy displays coupled with bright lighting can be overstimulating for some.

Create a nook or safe space that is calm and quiet in your classroom.

Make sure rules and routines are as consistent as possible

Try to ensure predictability! Be very clear about the rules and the boundaries. Introduce daily class rituals – greetings, the same tidying up song for example.

Communication

Talk to the learner about what works well for them. Don't use idioms. Say things as they are and as simple as possible. Don't worry about repeating several times.

Say what you'll do and do what you say!

Sensory circuits

Sensory circuits involve a series of physical activities designed to both energise and calm children who may have difficulties with sensory processing.

The activities are usually organised into 3 sections – **Alerting**, **Organising** and **Calming** and should flow from one to the next.

Alerting activities could include:

- Jumping up and down
- Hopping
- Skipping
- Running
- Bouncing on a ball or trampoline
- Hula hooping



Organising activities require timing and balance. They could include:

- Throwing bean bags into a target
- Walking along a line on the floor – could be taped on in different shapes
- Walking along a balance beam, or a set of objects
- Wobble boards
- Blowing bubbles at a target



Calming activities will leave children feeling unflustered and ready to continue with the day. They could include:

- Using a weighted blanket or toy
- Applying pressure using a roller or a ball
- Massage
- Reading



Helpful contacts and further information

National Autistic Society

www.autism.org.uk

Ambitious about Autism

www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

Autism Spectrum Teacher

www.autismspectrumteacher.com

Embrace Autism

www.embrace-autism.com

NHS

www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism



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