

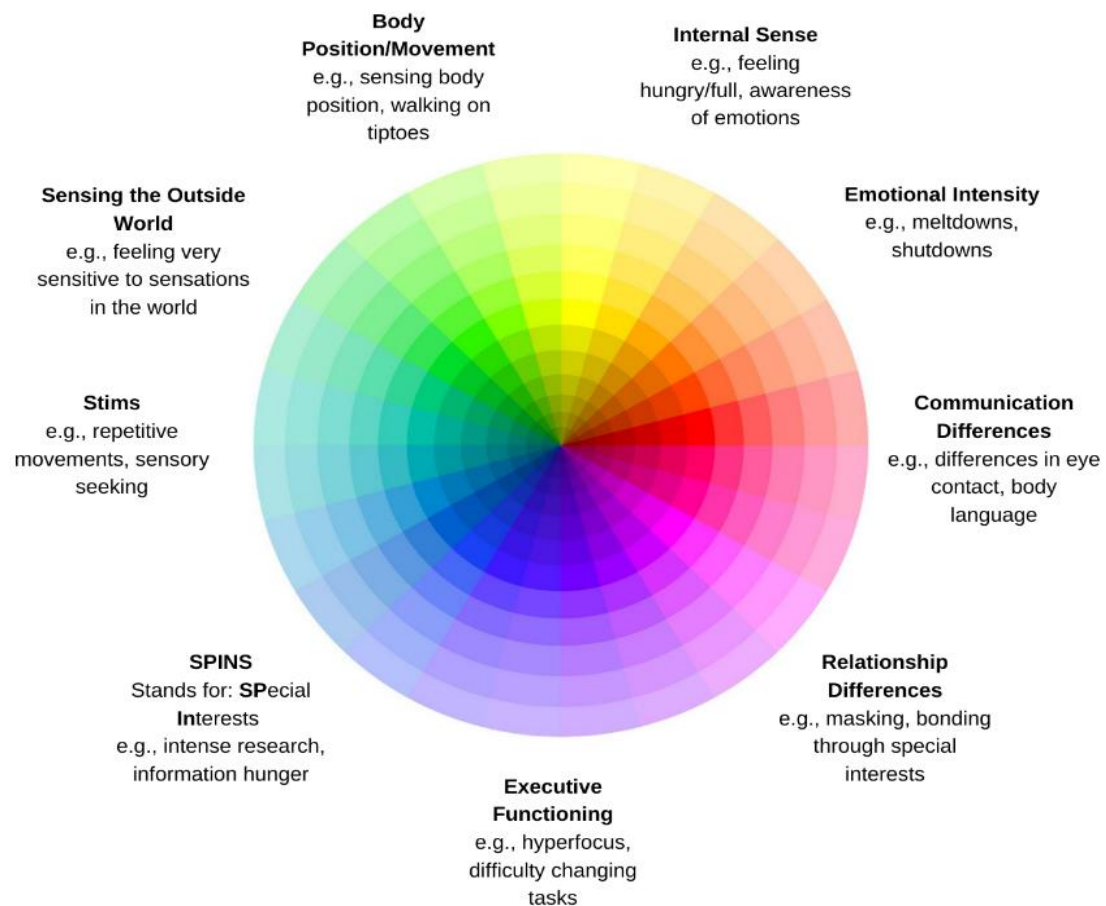
Autism

Overview description

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition. It affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people and how they experience the world around them. It can be diagnosed at any age. It is characterised by differences in social communication, sensory processing and patterns of behaviour and interests.

Autism is a different way of seeing and experiencing the world. The term 'autism spectrum' is used because there is wide variation in peoples' experiences. It occurs in males and females, and in all ethnic, racial, and economic groups.

The Autism Spectrum



Adapted from: Lowry, M. (2022). The Autism Spectrum [Online image]. Matt Lowry LPP.
<https://www.mattlowrylpp.com/>

When someone is being assessed for autism, these things are considered:

- The way they communicate: like their experience of eye contact, body language, friendships and having conversations.
- Their passionate interests and preference for sameness, fixed routines and familiarity
- Their sensory experiences (e.g. being very sensitive to certain sounds and sensations, such as busy, noisy areas)

The Three Areas Autism is Typically Defined by



Social understanding
and communication



Flexibility, information
processing and understanding



Sensory processing
and integration

Source: Autism Education Trust

Every autistic person has their own strengths and differences and their own unique personality. However, autistic people do have certain similarities with their communication and their experiences of the world.

It's important that education professionals have a balanced view of autism and understand the strengths as well as the challenges of being autistic in a neurotypical world. Spectrum Gaming, an online community for autistic young people, state the following:

'... autistic brains have many positives These may include logical brain with good attention to detail, the ability to focus deeply, strong memory skills and unique thought processes. Autistic people place less value on small talk and more on openness and honesty. Autistic people may also have lots of knowledge and skills in one specific area.'

Many autistic people need extra support at nursery, school or in college, because most places have been designed for non-autistic people and might not suit autistic people's communication and needs. This can lead to vulnerabilities in education settings, which are complex social and sensory environments. Autistic individuals often have talents and abilities that should be recognised and celebrated.

Examples of some social communication challenges young people may display are: (but are not limited to):

accessing classroom language

sustaining a conversation

understanding 'nonverbal' cues and being asked to make eye contact

expectations about forming and maintaining relationships

Showing emotional reciprocity (tuning in to others' emotions)

Limited interest in pretend play and reciprocal play, including sharing and turn-taking

giving 'joint attention' (bringing things to show you; pointing things out; following your gaze')

Examples of repetitive and restricted behaviours include (but are not limited to);

Preoccupations with parts of objects, such as wheels of toy cars instead of the cars themselves

Strong preferences for rituals and reliance on routines and predictability; a resistance to change

Repetitive motor behaviours (self-stimulating behaviours, or 'stimming') e.g. rocking, hand-flapping

Preoccupation(s) with certain topics and/ or activities. Some children may derive comfort and enjoyment from verbal rituals or talking about their preferred topic

Autism and Anxiety

- Many autistic people are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder or experience symptoms of anxiety that significantly impact their life
- A wide-range of education-related factors can provoke anxiety, including:
 - The environment
 - The Curriculum
 - Social Interactions and Communication
 - Requirements for flexibility
 - Sensory issues

High levels of anxiety can underpin challenging behaviour.

It may not be obvious that a young person is anxious, because of 'autistic masking'



What to do if you think a child or young person you are working with may be autistic?

The following link provides information and advice for education professionals:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/teachers-diagnosis>

Manchester's Social Communication Pathway (SCP)

The Social Communication Pathway (SCP) is an autism assessment service for children and young people in Manchester. The team consists of: Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Mental Health Practitioners, Educational Psychologists, Paediatricians

The SCP team work with children and young people who have differences with the following areas:

- Social relationships
- Expressing and understanding feelings
- Communication
- Changes to routine/unexpected changes
- Sensitivity to sensory input such as noise, textures and tastes

Young people may also have special interests and things they are very good at. Some children and young people experience these differences because they are autistic. Some children and young people have these differences but are not autistic.

Referral Criteria and Process

Child or young people 3 to 18 years old, registered with a Manchester GP Questionnaires to be completed by parent/carer and nursery/school/college about the child/young person's social communication. School/nursery should complete a separate education questionnaire. For young people over the age of 14 years, it may be helpful to complete a Young Person's questionnaire.

You can download all questionnaires from here:

<https://mft.nhs.uk/rmch/services/camhs/young-people/social-communication-pathway-autism-assessment/>

Please also include any relevant reports and information, e.g. Speech and Language assessments, Educational Psychology assessments. This will help avoid delays in processing your child's referral.

Once both PARENT/CARER & EDUCATION forms are completed, the SCP team will consider whether we think an autism assessment is needed.

(There are other reasons that children and young people can present with social differences, communication differences and behaviour that challenges. For example, if the child has specific learning or language difficulties; or behaviour may be a reaction to significant life experiences. We may feel an autism assessment is not appropriate in this case).

What can educational settings do to support autistic pupils?

Effective support for autistic children and young people is underpinned by an inclusive and person-centred ethos. Autistic students have the right to be included and their best interests should be placed at the centre of planning for their support. In line with the SEN Code of Practice (DfE & DHSC, 2014). The Code of Practice emphasises the importance of working in close collaboration with parents. Many autistic pupils are highly anxious about their educational setting and parents can often shed light on the underlying reasons.

Staff should collaborate with the pupils and their parents when developing outcomes, planning, implementing and reviewing strategies/ support packages.

Below are a few 'top tips' on how to understand and address behaviours that may challenge those working with autistic pupils in educational contexts. These are taken from a variety of sources which are listed in the 'references' and 'useful links' sections below. Educational strategies for autistic pupils have been researched extensively over the years. Hence, listing every single approach and strategy is beyond the scope of this section. Readers are advised to consult the reference list and 'useful links' sections below for more information on different educational strategies.

Above all, it is important to plan for the individual, following a careful assessment of need and using their priorities where possible.

Planning for autistic children and young people

- Ensure that all staff have received up-to-date training on autism. This can be provided by educational psychologists (EPs), specialist teachers from outreach services and/ or other external agencies such as the Autism Education Trust (AET).
- There is new training in Greater Manchester written by the Autism In Schools Group. <https://manchesterparentcarerforum.org.uk/tag/autism-in-schools/>

Contact Manchester LA for details

- Use Manchester's 'About Me' profile to ensure all staff understand the child's needs
- Take pictures and/ or videos of the classroom areas, dining all, toilet(s), and members of staff, so that pupils know what to expect. These photographs can be compiled in an electronic and/ or 'hard copy' booklet for each pupil to take home.
- Use Social Stories (Grey, White & McAndrew, 2001) to prepare pupils for their transition into their new class/ education/ training provider. (follow the links on the 'useful websites' section below to learn more about Social Stories)
- Plan for transitions, e.g. a visual timetable, careful preparation
- Explicitly state the rules, boundaries and expectations using each pupil's preferred communication medium which can be identified in consultation with parents and/ or professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists (SALT) and educational psychologists (EPs)

Strategies

- Communicate effectively with autistic pupils to establish their learning preferences. Ensure that those with the capacity to do so are involved in planning, implementing and reviewing their support package. Developing a positive working relationship with them is key to success.
- Communicate regularly and effectively with parents/carers about approaches and strategies. They know their child best. Doing so not only increases the likelihood that strategies will be consistently implemented, but may also improve the quality of the home-school relationship. Use Manchester's 'About Me' profile
- Present work in manageable chunks. Most autistic pupils may feel easily overwhelmed which could lead to resistant or avoidant behaviours.
- Allow the young person to do one thing at a time.
- Provide consistency and predictability as much as possible.
- Prepare for the unexpected. Pre-warn pupils of anticipated changes in routines, e.g. teaching assistant leaving or a fire drill.
- Foster an environment where mistakes are allowed and are reframed as learning opportunities. This includes modelling from staff, constructive conversations focused on teaching appropriate behaviour instead of punishments with students following incidents

Strategies that aim to address behaviours that are challenging

The most effective way to manage behaviours that challenge is to prevent them from happening in the first place! The 'best odds' for reducing these types of behaviours is to ensure that your autistic students are properly supported and understood, by all staff they may encounter.

Undesired behaviours will always 'boil down' to one of two things – or a combination. These are, that the student has skills or understanding that lag behind their age, or has expectations upon them that they cannot meet (these expectations can be self imposed, or imposed by someone else). Autistic students often find the sensory and social environment of their educational environment very challenging and draining, and this can reduce their resilience in the face of apparently minor issues. It is also important to acknowledge that the way that adults around them interact and interpret their behaviours can inflame or calm a situation.

More specifically, major stressors in the classroom include:

1. Language, social and/ or academic demands are too high (or the pupil perceives them as being higher than their abilities)
2. Violation of the pupils' expectations, including rapid and unexpected transitions or changes in routines
3. Sensory input, e.g. adults and/ or other pupils being noisier than usual; new bright decorations; unusual smell

When serious incidents occur, it is important to have the opportunity to reflect on what went wrong. This should include not only what the young person did, but also whether adults/peers accidentally contributed to the situation. Autistic people in mainstream settings will usually know and understand the expected behaviours e.g. not to swear or hit, but may have been unable to self-regulate in the moment. So effective de-briefs should include supporting the young person to develop a toolkit of strategies. A 'comic strip conversation' can support understanding of others' perspectives if this is an issue. Useful resources will include the 5 point scale and Zones of Regulation.

Preventative Strategies

Autism and Anxiety

- Understand – anxiety induced behaviour is not a choice
- Follow the Assess, Plan, Do, Review Cycle (as with any other child with SEND)
- Make a plan with parents, the child and other appropriate professionals

- Access to an identified member of staff and key adult to 'check in' with young people during the day
- Have a 'safe place' or base identified in their educational setting
- Inform all staff about the young person's difficulties – with a do's and don't list
- Create a one page profile

Examples of environmental modifications

- Changing seating plans to ensure that autistic pupils are away from distractions and/ or closer to the teacher/ TA
- Speak to the yp/their family about the sensory environment and make adjustments e.g. removing a loud clock, adapting uniform, avoiding busy times in a dining hall; changing classroom display, leaving classes early to avoid crowded corridors
- Reduce demands. As stated previously, allow autistic pupils to complete one task at a time.
- Use clear language, and repeat as necessary
- Provide visual representations of lesson information and instructions, as well as timetables and routes between classrooms
- Provide a time-out pass for the pupils to use when the classroom environment becomes overwhelming
- Ensure that pupils have access to a quiet place where they can go to (supervised by adults) when needed
- Use of timers and verbal warnings to prepare for transitions between activities/ lessons

Support from professionals

Staff are encouraged to seek support from relevant professionals such as EPs, SALT and CAMHS.

"I'm autistic, which means everyone around me has a disorder that makes them say things they don't mean, not care about structure, fail to hyperfocus on singular important topics, have unreliable memories, drop weird hints and creepily stare into my eyeballs."

Autisticnotweird.com
fb.com/autisticnotweird
 -Chris Bonnelle

"So why do people say YOU'RE the weird one?"

"Because there's more of them than me."

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For Early
Years

Children in the early years with social communication delays will benefit from a range of strategies to support their familiarity, and therefore, predictability of transitions and routines. You may want to use a visual timetable and remove photos as the day progresses and activities are completed or use a now/next board. Remember, some children may not yet understand photographs/pictures so will need activities represented using real objects.

Harness opportunities for joint attention and purposeful communication. For example:

- Create communication by withholding actions for a short time for example whilst blowing bubbles, stop and say “ready, steady...” and pause for the child to gesture, sign or verbally request for more.
- Offer choices which allow the child to tell you what they want in their preferred way. For example, hold out two items – one the child likes and one they don’t and allow them to gesture, take or look at the item they would like.
- Utilise an intensive interaction approach to mirror and imitate children’s vocalisations to create shared experiences together.
- Attention Autism is an intervention model to develop natural and spontaneous communication through the use of visually based and highly motivating activities:
<https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/speech-language/extra-help-for-early-communication/attention-autism/>

The Bristol Autism Team Toolkit provides a breadth of practical activities to support transition, communication and independence in the early years:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/4016-bristol-autism-team-early-years-toolkit-july-17/file>

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Young people may want to learn more about their autism diagnosis and understand how they can manage in a society that is designed for neuro-typical people. There are a range of books and podcasts that are often written by or delivered by autistic people.

- Check out Jessica Kingsley Publishers. This is a specialist company that deals in books related to neurodiversity, diversity in general, mental health etc. They have a good website.
- ‘Explaining Humans’ by Dr Camilla Pang.
- <https://uniquelyhuman.com>: This is a podcast which aims to celebrate autism and neuro-diversity hosted by Barry Prizant and Dave Finch.

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Useful resources and links:

- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/postsecondary-education>
- <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/sites/default/files/reports/files/finished-at-school-guide-ambitious-about-autism.pdf>
- <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/post-16-competency-framework>
- <https://autismunderstood.co.uk/>

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Useful links

Autism Understood <https://autismunderstood.co.uk/>

A website about autism written by and for autistic young people

'We have made this website so that everyone can gain a better understanding of what autism is, since most people we meet seem a little confused about what autism actually is.'

Advice for teaching staff who suspect that a pupil presents with symptoms of autism:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/teachers-diagnosis>

National Autistic Society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Greater Manchester Autism Consortium <https://www.autismgm.org.uk/>

Autism Education Trust <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>

Academic Autism Partnership in Research and Education: <https://aaspire.org/>

Social Stories: <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/> and
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations>

Spectrum Gaming. An online community for autistic young people online
<https://www.spectrumgaming.net/>

Manchester Social Communication Pathway
<https://mft.nhs.uk/rmch/services/camhs/young-people/social-communication-pathway-autism-assessment/>