

How Autism Affects Learning

What is Autism?

Autism is considered as a 'spectrum' condition. Some individuals with ASD have severe learning difficulties whereas others may have above average intelligence and no obvious difficulties with communication. People with autism experience developmental difficulties with regard to: social development, communication and flexibility in thinking in behaviour. These difficulties are experienced by all people with autism, but their individual needs and the level of support required, may vary considerably.

Social and Emotional

Difficulties with:

- Friendships
- Managing unstructured parts of the day
- Working with others

Flexibility of thought:

Difficulties with:

- Coping with changes in routine
- Empathy
- Generalisation

Language & Communication

Difficulty with:

- Processing and retaining verbal information
- Literal interpretation
- Understanding: Jokes and sarcasm, body language, facial expression & gesture

Possible Sensory processing difficulties:

Difficulty with strong smells, loud noises, dislike of certain foods etc. Also, may seek out stimulation through rocking, flapping, tapping, tasting, touching or sniffing.

Anxiety: A high proportion of individuals with

Autism experience difficulties with anxiety.

The adolescent years are a particularly difficult time for these young people. Difficulties with: homework, exams, changes to staff, classrooms, school trips etc.

Spot Check:

Areas of Difficulty for those with Autism — Communication



The pupils may:

- Struggle to understand non-literal language such as jokes or sarcasm
- Shout out, become frustrated, echo what has been said to them
- Not understand instructions or what is expected of them
- Struggle to process information
- Find it difficult to express their thoughts or feelings

As a result, they may:

- Be targeted by bullies, be lonely
- Appear to be under achieving
- Get lost, forget things, be late
- Only process part of an instruction/information
- Be misunderstood
- Struggle to have conversations and make friends
- Not record homework correctly

Teachers and Support staff can help by:

- Using clear, unambiguous language
- Allowing time for processing
- Avoid instructions with multiple parts
- Use visual aids/samples of work to show what is expected
- Double check they have understood/written down work
- Ensure they have somewhere to go during unstructured times, a buddy/mentor

Spot Check:

Areas of Difficulty for those with Autism – Social



The pupils may:

- Struggle to cope with social interaction
- Be unable to cope with demands on their social skills as they get older
- Struggle to process non-verbal cues
- Not understand what is expected of them
- Be unable to forge relationships with peers/others
- Misunderstand what others are trying to convey/misread situations



As a result, they may:

- Feel lonely/like they do not 'fit in'
- Become anxious, upset, isolated
- Feel embarrassed, awkward or put themselves at risk through misunderstanding
- Display challenging behaviour because they cannot cope with social demands/group work etc
- Be targets for bullying
- Not understand/accept sanctions

Teachers and Support staff can help by:

- Double checking the pupil has understood, and that meaning is grasped
- Excusing the pupil if they are not coping with large groups, group work tasks etc
- Social skills support – teaching about the social intricacies that can confuse
- Support them with joining clubs and during break times – buddy/place to go
- Monitor closely for signs of isolation/bullying



Spot Check:

Areas of Difficulty for those with Autism – Flexibility of Thinking and Behaviour



The pupils may:

- Struggle with transitions: new classes, teachers, buildings, timetables
- Find any change to routine difficult
- Struggle with unstructured time
- Take longer to process verbal and non-verbal information
- Be unable to generalise skills learned



As a result, they may:

- Appear to understand rules/what to do in one setting but be unable to transfer this understanding/knowledge to other situations
- Become anxious or distressed by change
- Seem to be unsettled/misbehave during break/lunch times
- Get lost or become confused

Teachers and Support staff can help by:

- Ensuring the pupil has clear timetables, diaries and maps to aid organisation
- Not expecting pupils to grasp new rules/concepts first time or to be able to transfer skills
- Forewarning of changes to routine and prepare for transition carefully
- Ensuring pupils have set things to do during unstructured time
- Making lesson material and expectations clear

