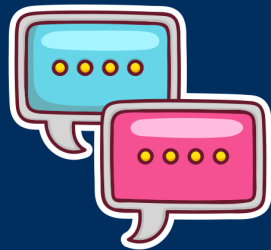


Understanding Autism, and associated needs

Autism (or ASD) is a lifelong developmental disability. Being autistic changes the way people see, feel, play and communicate with the world. Autism affects people in different ways. Like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses.

Social Skills



Routine and repetition



Dysregulated Behaviours



Sensory needs



Highly focused interests and hobbies



Anxiety and self care



Social Skills

Most autistic people find understanding speech, facial expression and body language hard.

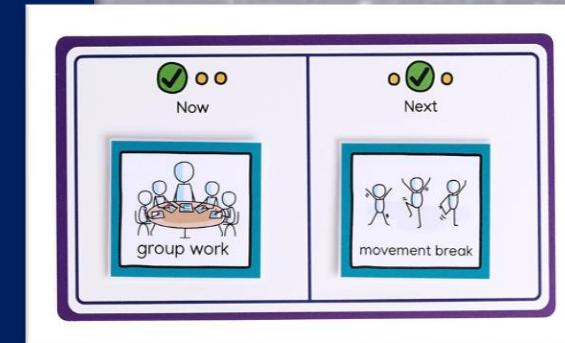
Some autistic people...

- are unable to speak, or have limited speech.
- speak in an 'unusual' accent or tone.
- have very good spoken language skills but struggle to understand or process what is being said to them.
- can appear to be 'blunt' or sensitive
- need alone time to 'top up' after socialising
- struggle to understand what is expected in a social situation
- find it hard to form or maintain friendships

Things we can do to help:

- always begin communication with the young person by using their name. Check they are listening before you talk to them or give them an instruction.
- give 'take up time', allow the young person the process and think before they answer a question
- use visual supports where possible (we have access to Symwriter in school)
- understand that communication can be harder in a new, loud or anxiety-inducing environment
- use visual labels in the classroom/home to promote independence
- being patient and positive is key.

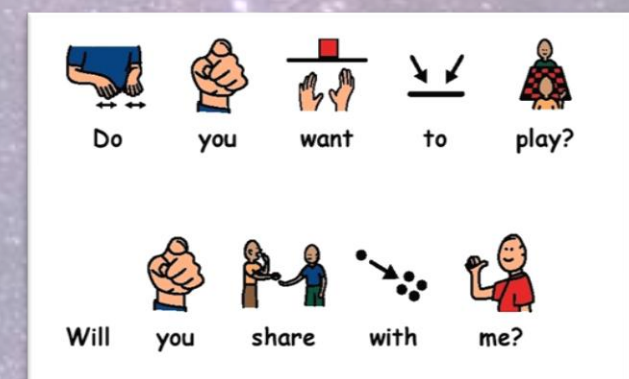
Choices boards



Now and Next boards



Task Sequence Strips



Visual scripts



Routine and repetition

As we move through our lives we learn things about the world around us. We learn social rules and act differently as a result. Some of these things feel 'natural' for us, others are taught by our parents and teachers.

For non-autistic people the world is full of unwritten rules. Rules that we don't always know we need to teach explicitly.

Without these rules the world can feel scary for autistic people.

Routines can make people feel safe because they make the world more predictable.

Think of a **roller-coaster**. If you sat in a carriage and could not see the track and then got thrown about in mid-air it would be so frightening you would fear for your life. But, when we can see the track we have a sense of what will happen, allowing us to access the joy of the ride.

A routine is like the 'track' that allows autistic people to enjoy their day to day life in a safe way.

This 'track' can include:

- Getting up and going to sleep at the same time
- Wearing the same clothes / colours
- Eating the same foods / eating foods in a specific way
- Needing to travel the same way to school
- Following a personal timetable

In school we often enjoy '**special events**'. It is essential that we inform our young people about these and talk to them about them in advance. When children are given the chance to talk about these, ask questions and in some cases 'practise' what to do, they are then able to enjoy the event. Without this preparation a 'fun' or 'exciting' event like a trip or disco can become something that causes fear and anxiety.

It is important to A) respect that routine is something that autistic people value and need AND B) teach autistic children to cope with change and unpredictability.

Social Stories are great way to prepare children for a big change in life. Miss Hodginkson, Miss Bell and Miss Meyrick can support you in writing one of these.

This website gives great advice on Social Stories:

[Social stories and comic strip conversations \(autism.org.uk\)](https://autism.org.uk/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations)



Sensory Needs

The autistic brain processes things differently. It can sometimes take in 'too much' information and often 'not enough' information.

This can impact the way autistic people experience:

- Sounds
- Touch
- Taste
- Smells
- Light
- Colour
- Temperature
- Pain



A family birthday meal

What you might experience...

A warm room full of your loved ones. Food you have carefully prepared. You feel relaxed and at ease, the radio is playing gently in the background and you have already loaded the dishwasher. You have lit your favourite candle so the room smells beautiful and festive. You can't wait to bring out the cake and see your youngest child's face. You feel happy and lucky.

What a young autistic person might experience...

The room is full of people I don't know...the lady in the green cardigan is wearing perfume and it is burning my nostrils. We don't usually eat this on a Sunday...where is my macaroni cheese? This room is so loud. Am I going to have to eat that? It is so hot in this room...wait this new jumper is a bit itchy. Oh no, dad is looking at me and telling me to stop fidgeting. Smile? Why? Wait...I want mum to enjoy her birthday...okay, focus... Why is that candle flickering so much? Oh no...why are people singing? It is so so...I can't cope. I have to run...

In order to support autistic people we have to accept that the way they experience something can be very different to the way we do. We have to work **WITH** it rather than **AGAINST** it.

Every person is different and will have a different sensory profile. Get to know your young person's needs. **Pay attention**; watch, listen, take notice and keep a note of things that result in changes in behaviour.

If possible, **talk to your child** about their sensory experience. They are the best person to teach us about the way they experience the world.

Have a '**quiet**' area where the young person can go to if they feel 'over stimulated'.

Think about new experiences in advance and think about any **sensory challenges** that might come up. E.g. the smell of chemicals in a science lesson / the feeling of dough on hands when baking.

Be **solution focused**. Think about **HOW** the young person can access an experience. Do they need a pair of ear defenders? Do they need to keep a window open? Do sunglasses help on a bright day?



Anxiety and self care

Anxiety is something that affects many people.

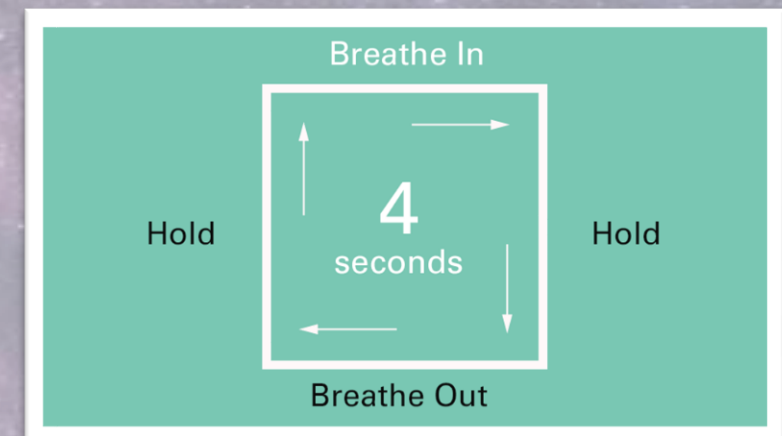
The world is not built for autistic people and as such living in it can make it more likely for autistic people to experience anxiety.

Teaching young people how to recognise things that make them feel worried or anxious is key. Encouraging them to share these things and taking a 'no worry is too small' approach can reduce shame and make young people more likely to ask for help.

Teaching children how to take care of themselves and their mental health from a young age is important.

Some ways of doing this are...

- Breathing techniques
- Worry book/gratitude diaries (which can be voice recordings or drawings if writing isn't an option)
- Meditation and mindfulness (YouTube has so many great examples)
- Affirmations / positive self talk
- Blowing bubbles, massage, hugs



Teaching a young person what emotions can feel like in the body and using language to 'name it' can make big feelings feel less scary.

Examples...

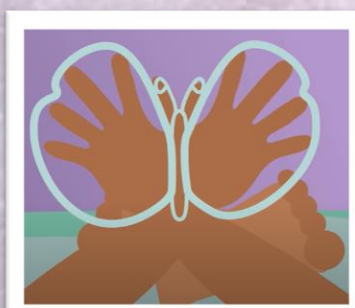
- When we cry our throats sometimes feel tight
- When we are worried our tummies can feel fizzy
- When we are embarrassed our cheeks might feel hot and they might go red
- When we feel angry we sometimes squeeze our fist
- When we need the toilet our lower belly start to feel 'full' or tight.



[Candle and Flower Breathing - Mindful and Calming Breathing Technique - YouTube](#)



[The Body Scanner! Mindfulness for Children - YouTube](#)



[Butterfly Hug! 6-Minute Self-Soothing Meditation For Children Using The Butterfly Hug Technique. - YouTube](#)



[10 Daily Positive Affirmations for Kids | Boost Your Child's Confidence and Self-Esteem - YouTube](#)



Dysregulated Behaviours

Dysregulated behaviours occur when a young person becomes overwhelmed.

These are very intense and exhausting experiences.

This can happen if

- the sensory environment is 'too much' e.g. a busy supermarket
- a big change in routine
- a person has spent the day 'masking' or pretending to be 'normal'
- the young person does not understand what is happening or why
- the young person feels under threat



A **meltdown** is a loss of control. This results in the young person temporarily losing control. This can look like screaming, crying, kicking, lashing out, biting and occasionally self harm.

These are not the same as a 'temper tantrum'.

A **shutdown** looks less intense on the outside but feels horrible on the inside. This will look like the child 'switches off' or 'powering down'.



In these situations it is essential that:

- you remain as calm as you can - remember, this is happening to the child, not to you
- tell the child they are safe
- prevent the child from hurting themselves or others
- remove anything that might be a risk to the child
- where possible create privacy for the child / young person
- let them know you are there to support them
- do not shout or get angry
- do not bribe / threaten / ignore

A **script** can be extremely helpful in this situation. It can help the adult involved feel less helpless and will give the young person something safe to come back to.

Examples:

"You are safe, you can stop now."

"I am here, I love you."

"I am wondering if you are feeling scared...I am here for you."

"I am going to stay here with you until you are ready."



Highly focused interests and hobbies

Many autistic people have special interests. These can be life long, or they can change like the seasons.

Autistic people take a lot of joy in learning everything there is to know about a topic and often like to share this knowledge with others.

It is important to celebrate and create space for these interests. Often, young people can find friendships, hobbies and even careers linked to these interests.

It is also important to teach young autistic people how to 'switch off' or how to recognise when it is time to talk about something new. This can be done through practise, modelling and 'key words'.

Stimming

Stimming are repetitive movements that we make when need to regulate our emotions.

Almost everybody stims. Lots of 'neuro-typical' (or people who are not autistic) stim when we are exciting, nervous or bored.

This can look like:

- Hair-twirling
- Playing with jewellery
- Humming / whistling
- Tapping / clicking
- Tapping / chewing pens
- Pacing

Autistic people can also stim by:

- Flapping their arms
- Rocking
- Clapping
- Repeating short words / sounds
- Spinning



Stimming is often very enjoyable and a way to reduce stress and so it shouldn't be stopped or reduced. However, stimming can sometimes result in injury, for example, head-banging or scratching.

Ask yourself if the behaviour restricts the young person's opportunities, causes distress or discomfort, or impacts on learning? If it is causing difficulties, or is in some way unsafe, they may need support to stop or modify the behaviour, or reduce their reliance on it.

