

Understanding Autism Spectrum Condition

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong condition. Autism affects how individuals communicate, interact and relate to other people and the world around them.

Autism is a Spectrum condition because whilst individuals may share some symptoms, ultimately everyone is affected differently and to varying degrees. Some individuals with Autism Spectrum condition can lead relatively independent lives, whilst others may require specialist support.

The term Autism Spectrum condition covers a group of conditions, as well as Autism it also includes: Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified and childhood disintegrative disorder.

Autism is also referred to as Autism Spectrum disorder (ASD) by some professionals. Ultimately the two terms mean the same, but Autism spectrum condition is the preferred term by most professionals.

‘The hidden disability’

Autism is often referred to as a ‘hidden disability’ as individuals do not ‘look’ disabled. Often parents of children with Autism find that other adults misunderstand their children. Therefore a timely diagnosis and appropriate support is often essential for parents and families.

Triad of Impairments

Individuals with Autism have three main areas of difficulty and these are called the ‘triad of impairments’. The triad of impairments includes difficulties with social interaction, social communication and social imagination.

**Social Interaction**- difficulties understanding emotions and feelings

**Social Imagination** – difficulties with abstract concepts, understanding and predicting behaviours and unfamiliar situations

**Social Communication** – difficulties understanding and using language

Social interaction

As we all grow up and develop, we learn the rules of social interaction. Individuals on the Autistic Spectrum find it difficult to learn these rules and will have difficulty recognising, understanding and reacting to their own and other people’s feelings and emotions. Some individuals with Autism prefer to spend time on their own and do not always seek out socialisation with other people; therefore it can be difficult to form friendships with peers. Some individuals with Autism may be keen to form friendships but may find it difficult to do so if they have difficulties following the unwritten social rules. Individuals may not use eye contact, facial expression, body language and gesture appropriately.

Social communication

Individuals on the Autistic Spectrum have difficulties understanding and using verbal and non-verbal language. Quite often, individuals have a literal interpretation of language; this includes jokes, sarcasm and idioms. Individuals may have limited expression, and therefore may prefer to use alternative methods of communication. Sometimes, individuals may have difficulties with conversations; they may find turn taking and eye contact confusing, frequently repeat what they hear and may persistently speak about their own special interests.

Social imagination

Individuals with Autism have great imaginations; many people on the Autistic Spectrum are very creative.

Individuals on the Autistic Spectrum may have difficulties with some aspects of social imagination, including: understanding and predicting how other people feel, predicting what could happen next, understanding danger, engaging in imaginative play, new and unfamiliar situations and coping with changes to routines.

Other characteristics of Autism

Individuals with Autism can be affected in many different ways and it is not possible to list all of the characteristics. However individuals may have the following characteristics:

-Sensory problems – Sensory difficulties can arise in any of the five senses and an individual may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive

-Special interests – individuals may have intense special interests, this could be a fairly common interest or an obscure one

- Routine focused – an individual may have specific daily routines and may become upset or anxious if these are changed

Causes of Autism

At present, the cause of Autism Spectrum condition is unknown. Research however does indicate that certain genetic and environmental factors may contribute to Autism Spectrum condition. Autism is not caused by an individual’s upbringing.

Currently there is no ‘cure’ for Autism Spectrum condition. However there are a range of education and behavioural programmes available that have been developed by specialists that can be effective in developing the skills of individuals with Autism.

Association conditions

Some conditions are associated with Autism Spectrum conditions. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, motor control and perception, epilepsy, dyslexia, dyspraxia and feeding difficulties are such examples.

Speech and Language Therapy

Speech and Language Therapists aim to develop the skills and abilities of individuals with Autism Spectrum condition. The therapist will work closely with the individual, their family and other relevant services and individuals at all times. The following are some of the areas that therapy may focus on, but is not limited to:

- Semantic and pragmatic skills

- Shared attention

- Understanding of emotions

- Understanding of relevance

- Theory of mind

- Communication skills

- Turn taking

- Strategies to cope with changes

- Use of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC)

- Strategies to develop life skills

- Social interaction skills

- Behaviour in social settings

- Self esteem

- Strategies to reduce anxiety

When focusing on the above areas in therapy, therapists may use specific interventions such as Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), social stories, social communication programmes, colourful semantics and Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACHH).

The therapist may also work closely to educate and train professionals across a range of settings.

Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC)

AAC devices help individuals to communicate; devices may be high or low technology systems or may include no technology at all. For individuals with Autism Spectrum conditions, PECS, interactive communication board, conversation books and voice output communication aids are well used AAC approaches.

PECS

PECS is an AAC system that uses visual symbols to teach the learner to communicate with those around them. The aim is to teach intentional, functional communication and to allow users to communicate their wants and needs.

There are five phases to teaching the PECS approach. It is an approach that is frequently used with individuals on the Autistic Spectrum. PECS becomes the users voice, enabling them to communicate and it can be used anywhere.

PECS has been shown to develop intentional communication, develop social skills, improve spoken language skills and increase opportunities for interaction.

Social stories

Social stories were developed by Carol Grey, a former teacher who worked with students with Autism. A social story provides accurate social information in a reassuring way, the information is set out in a story format and can easily be understood by the person it is written for.

There is a specific criterion for a social story so that an individual can improve their understanding of an event or expectation. Social stories provide individuals with guidance on how to behave in certain situations. Language needs to be carefully selected so that it is at an appropriate level for the individual.

Social stories can be used for a number of purposes; some examples are understanding personal care skills, preparing for changes to routine and giving advice on how to behave in certain situations.

Colourful semantics

The colourful semantics approach was created by Alison Bryan and is aimed at helping children to develop their grammar and meaning of words.

The approach is beneficial for children who are starting to develop language and have limited vocabulary. It encourages children to use a wider vocabulary including nouns, verbs, prepositions and adjectives. It encourages children to answer questions and improve their story telling skills.

There are four key colour coded stages that children need to learn to use; the therapist will introduce each stage one at a time.

TEACHH

TEACHH is a special education programme designed at the University of North Carolina in 1966. It was originally designed just to use with children with Autistic Spectrum conditions however now it is used with children with a range of Speech, Language and Communication needs.

TEACHH organises the physical environment and develops schedules and work systems for children, young people and adults. Many individuals with Autism Spectrum conditions have visual, detail and memory strengths and the TEACHH programme builds on these skills. Such schedules and work systems may include start and finish boxes and visual time tables. The TEACHH programme encourages independence.

Social Communication Programmes

Social communication programmes consist of a wide range of resources which can help children and adults to improve their social communication skills. Social communication programmes work on the premise that as social skills are learnt, they can also be taught to people who for many different reasons have not learned them.

The programme may focus on: non-verbal communication skills (eye contact, gesture, and proximity), paralinguistic skills (volume, rate, fluency and intonation), conversation skills (listening, turn taking, questions and relevance) and assertive behaviour (expressing feelings, apologising, complaining and requesting).