

Autism Awareness

Information & Resources



A bit about the authors:



Fliss Goldsmith
- Inclusion Activist & Children's
Author

It has always been Fliss' desire to shape the future. She began with her own drama company, devising and delivering drama sessions for children. Her ethos was that communication, creativity, and confidence were essential to the growth and foundational support of every child. Now, she has returned to the passion of her childhood – writing.

Fliss had been a published poet in her early 20s and had written many stage plays for both children and adults. What she really wanted to do though was to strip things back to the pure joy of writing a story. With the aim of encouraging children everywhere to see others like them in stories, recognise their heritage, their situation, and discuss some of the more sensitive topics that we find as we grow.



Claire Pass
- Co-founder of Dragonfly:
Impact Education

Claire envisions schools as the heart of communities with the confidence to nurture young minds. The mission of Dragonfly: Impact Education is to give school leaders the expertise to build schools where good mental health is the foundation for all success.

As a teacher with over 23 years' experience, Claire wholly believes in the power of young people 'being seen'. She co-founded Dragonfly: Impact Education in 2018 to address some of the issues she was seeing as children struggled and teachers lacked the resources to help. Experienced in school leadership, she has an array of qualifications and experience which she now draws on to train school staff nationwide.

WHY DOES AUTISM AWARENESS MATTER?

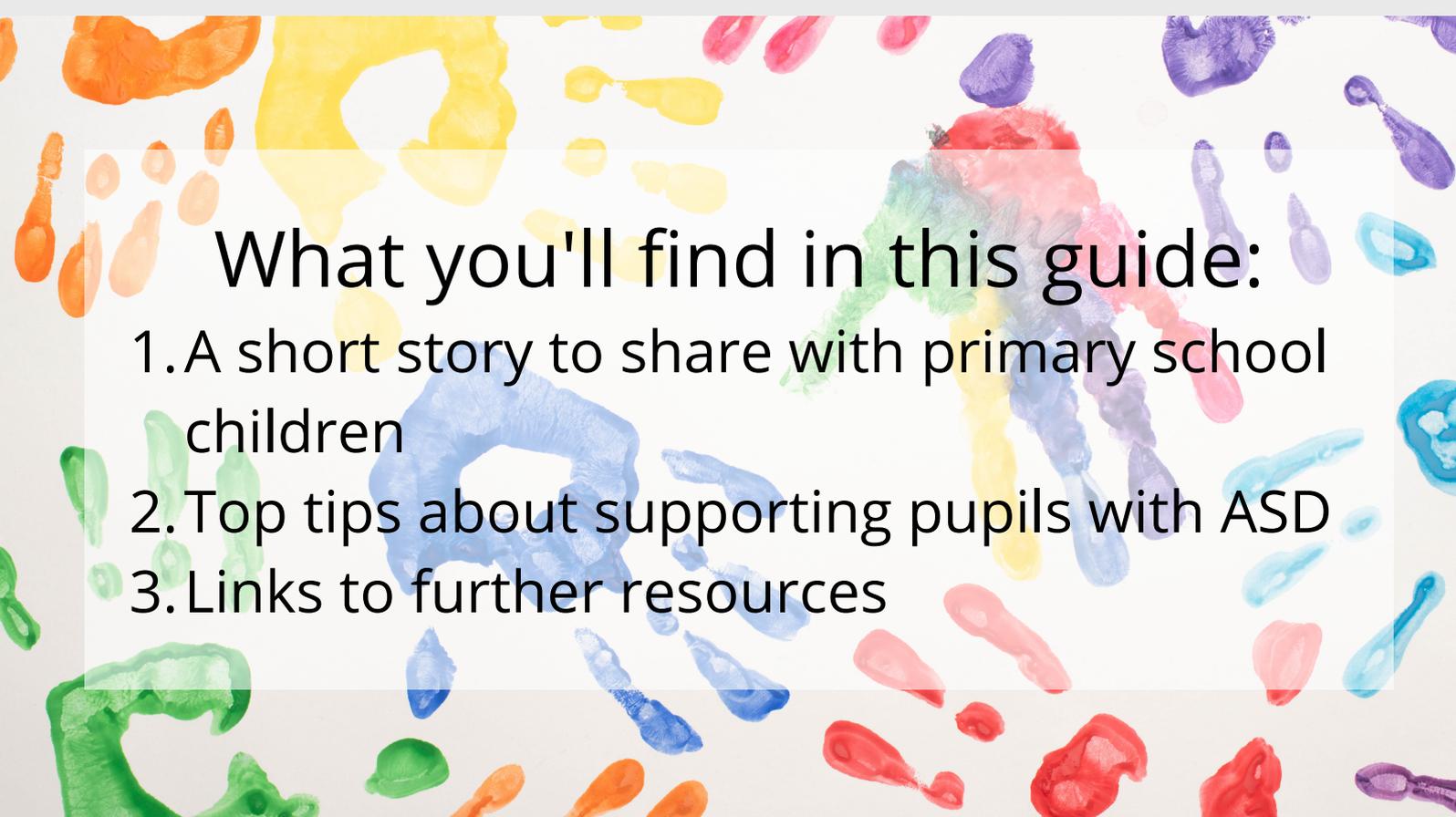
Things to know:

- Even though mental illness can be more common for people on the autism spectrum than in the general population, the mental health of autistic people is often overlooked. (NAS, 2020)
- Anxiety disorders are very common amongst people on the autism spectrum. Roughly 40% have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any time, compared with up to 15% in the general population. (NAS, 2020)

Imagine that each person has a backpack for the day and when that backpack is full, the person can no longer carry it. They can't go around and carry on with their day anymore because it's just too heavy. All of us have a backpack, regardless whether we're neuro-typical or neuro-atypical.

The backpack gets loaded each time we face a challenging situation, feel uncomfortable, have to make a difficult decision, or have to work something out. For people with autism, facing uncomfortable levels of noise, trying to work out the rules of social 'norms' and negotiate the hidden curriculum, their backpacks get filled much more quickly.

It's possible to empty the backpack at certain points during the day. For most people time socialising at break or lunch might help with this. For someone with autism, this could actually add more to their load! Being aware of the loads we all carry, what adds to them and what lightens them, is the key to true community and inclusion.



What you'll find in this guide:

1. A short story to share with primary school children
2. Top tips about supporting pupils with ASD
3. Links to further resources



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Autism in itself is not a mental health condition. We need to focus on difference, not deficit. Being aware of these differences can perhaps help us to alleviate the symptoms of anxiety that, for lots of reasons, so often accompany autism.

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Claire - Dragonfly Impact

A STORY BY FLISS GOLDSMITH

PICTURE PERFECT

It was a sunny Saturday and Dora wanted to go to the park to see her best friend Elise play in a basketball match.



Dora had knocked on Erin's door and shown her a note explaining her plans. Erin smiled and said, 'Shall we ask Benji too?' Dora nodded and blushed – she really liked Benji. They walked down the street, slowly, as Erin's leg still hadn't recovered after her skateboarding accident!

Questions that staff/parents might wish to explore:

- Why did Dora want to go to the park?
- How did Dora ask Erin to go with her?
- Is it unusual that she didn't speak?
- Did Erin find it unusual?



Dora knocked on Benji's door and Erin handed him the note from Dora. Benji read it and signed – 'Cool! Race you there!' Erin signed back 'Very funny!' Dora smiled and clutched her trusty notebook close to her. It made her feel safe and calm.

The sun was gentle and there was a soft breeze. As they came to the end of the road, they could see Elise already on the court. 'She's incredible!' Erin beamed. Dora smiled and then began to chew her beautiful braids. Benji signed 'Let's get ice cream.'

Erin and Dora sat in the shade of a tall tree next to the court. Benji went to buy ice cream. 'Elise!' Erin hollered – 'over here!' Elise waved at her friends and shouted, 'Did you bring a phone, I want photos of my winning shots!' Erin didn't have a phone and Dora shook her head.

Questions that staff/parents might wish to explore:

- Is Dora happy about Benji coming?
- How do you know?
- Does Dora speak to Erin or Benji?



'Oh no,' sighed Erin, 'Poor Elise won't get to see how awesome she is.' Dora looked down and flicked the pages of her special book. She took her book everywhere. Erin was in awe of Elise and was transfixed on her every move. The queue for the ice cream truck was huge but Benji waited patiently.



The game was over, and Elise came over to see her friends. 'Epic win!' Erin high fived her friend. 'Yeah, shame I can't see how awesome I looked!' Dora looked up and smiled. 'Hey bestie,' beamed Elise, 'thanks for coming out to see me shoot some hoops.'

Dora looked at the floor but held aloft her book. The whole time Elise had been playing, Dora had been drawing her in action. 'Woah that's amazing!' Elise roared. Erin was grinning. 'You know you see more than all of us Dora.' Dora blushed and started chewing her braids again.



SPLAT! The three girls turned to see Benji – sitting on the floor covered in ice cream! He signed 'I slipped!' and they all fell about laughing.

Questions that staff/parents might wish to explore:

- What did Dora do for her best friend?
- Why do you think Dora chewed her braids?
- Do Dora's friends mind that she doesn't speak?
- Is there anything else you noticed about any of the characters?

TOP TIPS

01

GIVE LANGUAGE TO FEELINGS

Start with 'easy' emotions (e.g. 'happy') and do one at a time. Make a collage of images from google which represent/show each emotion.

02

SPOT THE FEELING WITHOUT WORDS

Play a game - emotions charades, emotional statues or the 'face game' - guessing the message from the facial expression (e.g. raised eyebrows/a frown).

03

RECOGNISE THE FEELING

Ask them to make a playlist of songs or choose a part of a film or book that show how they're feeling.

04

SPOT THE FEELING WHEN THE WORDS DON'T MATCH

Guess the meaning of the same sentence said in different tones of voice. For both 3&4 remember that the autistic mind looks for differences, not similarities.

05

COMMUNICATE BY TEXT

Older children sometimes like to sit on the other side of the room/in their bedroom and text how they're feeling. It allows expression without direct interaction and gives processing time.

06

SCRAPBOOKING FEELINGS

Build a scrapbook of experiences. Write the name of the emotion at the top of the page and write down when it was felt, what happened, what the physical sensations were, and include photographs or pictures.

07

NEVER LIE, NEVER PROMISE & AVOID THE WORD 'NO'!

These can be triggers for an intense emotional reaction that is difficult to regulate (a meltdown!). Be as clear and straightforward and possible and use 'First x, then y' (e.g. 'first dinner, then a treat' / 'first homework and then PlayStation').



TOP TIPS

08

BE A SATNAV

Instead of pointing out what they've done wrong, state simply and neutrally what they need to do next – give them course corrections.

09

HAVE AN EVIDENCE FILE

Give them personality adjectives to describe themselves (kind, thoughtful, funny, brave etc). Each time they do or say something that shows that quality, write it down as tangible evidence, or include a photo.

10

MODEL MANAGING EMOTIONS

Vocalise your thought processes – let them internalise your voice. (E.g. 'I'm late and I've lost my keys! I'm going to keep calm because that way I can think more clearly. I'll take 3 deep breaths...')

11

THE EMOTIONAL TOOLBOX

Expose them to different ways of regulating themselves: smells, something they can touch/squeeze, physical activity, solitude, mindfulness, special 1:1 time with an adult – equip them with as many different tools as possible.

12

REHEARSALS

If there's a situation they find stressful or difficult, rehearse it with them. Practise remaining calm. If things go wrong, rewind and try again differently.

13

USE A FITBIT

They can produce graphs of your heart rate during the day, helping to identify trigger points and to use a regulating 'tool'. There's also a relaxation tool if the heart rate starts to rise because of a stressful situation.

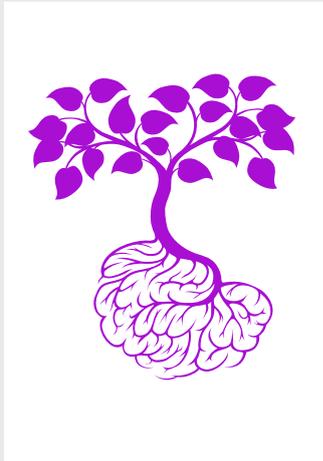
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MOOD DIARY

Have scales of 0 – 20 for each 'pair' of feelings: happy/sad, relaxed/anxious etc. Score the first feeling 20 and the second feeling 0, with 10 as the centre. Use this as a talking point to think about when they might need to use a 'tool'.



WHERE YOU CAN FIND MORE:



DRAGONFLY: IMPACT EDUCATION

- Free resources and a free weekly newsletter
- Fully funded senior mental health lead training
- Parent talks and Inset
- First Aid for Mental Health
- www.dragonflyimpact.com/how-we-can-help
- Follow us on social media @dragonflyimpact



FLISS GOLDSMITH:

- Books available to buy from the website
- <https://www.flissgoldsmith.com/shop-1>
- Mailing list available to keep in touch
- School visits available (Midlands based)
- <https://www.flissgoldsmith.com/>
- Follow me on social media:
- @flissgoldsmithinclusion
- @fgoldsmithbooks
- @FlissGoldsmithAuthor



AUTISM RESOURCES:

- These places are useful for resources or to signpost to parents looking for information:
- The National Autistic Society:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/directory/r/resources-for-autism>
- Ambitious About Autism:
<https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/>