

Information and Strategies for Children with ASD

Autism, or “Autistic Spectrum Disorder” (ASD) as the condition is officially known, is considered to be a disorder of development, characterised by impairment of language, communication and social interaction, rigidity of thought and behaviour, poor motor coordination and sensory perceptual differences.

What to look out for:

- Difficulties mixing with others – in high school this can lead to upset as the pupil struggles to find friends.
- The child may talk excessively about a specific target.
- They may avoid eye contact.
- They may interrupt conversations with repetitive questions.
- The pupil may take little account of their listener’s age or status and treat them in an inappropriate way e.g. hugging their form tutor or shouting at the Headteacher.
- They may have developed an unrelated accent or repeat others in a different accent from their norm.
- The pupil may take jokes, exaggeration and metaphors literally. An example of this may be to pull their socks off, if they are told to do this to work harder.
- The pupil may misunderstand facial expressions and react inappropriately such as laughing when someone is hurt.
- The pupil may have an obsession which takes over their life such as Minecraft, dinosaurs, Lego. They may spend hours collecting facts or objects related to this topic, and may not be interested in work they need to complete in lessons that is not linked to the topic.
- They may find changes to the school routine very disturbing.
- The child may refuse to follow the school routines such as the one-way system or wearing the school uniform. They may develop elaborate rituals to deal with the day.

Strategies:

- Pupils with ASD are individuals.
- Use the pupil’s name before giving instructions.
- An individual workstation can be helpful. This can be made with screens on the desk. These screens can be carried between lessons.
- Give explicit, clear instructions, in the order of doing (may need to be only 1 instruction at a time). Ask the pupil to repeat the instructions.
- Don’t use phrases such as ‘Do you want to?’, ‘Shall we.....?’, as they may be taken as an option to refuse participation.
- Use visual cues to make verbal information meaningful.

- Give examples of completed work so that pupil knows intended outcome or can parallel model.
- Break task down into meaningful parts.
- Give explicit work targets which are achievable and shared with pupil.
- Make initial eye contact, but do not expect to maintain it.
- Allow the child time to think.
- Develop clear predictable routines.
- Language is taken literally, so abstract language will need to be explained at the time of use.
- There will be a need for rules for listening, talking, turn taking, sharing, waiting, working with others, starting, finishing etc.
- Pupil needs to sit where the teacher can discretely assist and in a place free of distractions.
- Check that homework, and when it has to be in, has been written down and pupil understands what is to be done.
- Never punish pupils with ASD for behaviours that are part of their disability, for example, avoidance of eye contact; talking to self; slow response time; repeating words or phrases; upset in crowd or with noise; anxiety; persevering on topics of interest; upset caused by change.
- Transition between lessons and any free time in the school day (break/lunch) need to be structured to allow a routine to develop. Any changes need to be shared well in advance, and any concerns talked about.
- If the pupil is comfortable with praise and reward, this works well to help to encourage them to share their answers in lessons.
- Lessons should be very visual, with examples used to give the work context.
- Teachers will need to approach the pupil in order to ensure that she understands the work. A visual aid to alert the teacher that the pupil is struggling will help the child feel less awkward.
- A trusted adult may meet with the pupil on a regular basis in order to address any triggers or fears. Strategies can then be passed on to the teachers.
- Any sensory overload may cause stress or anxiety, and so this needs to be investigated by a trusted adult and then minimised.
- Reasonable adjustments may need to be made to address any fine motor difficulties such as typing rather than writing, or speech to text software.
- Teachers need training to understand the exhaustion that girls with ASD may feel “fitting in”.
- It is important that staff can identify rising anxiety or mental health issues in girls with ASD.

Girls and ASD

Girls with ASD often have a different profile from boys. They often are diagnosed much later, or not diagnosed at all. This can lead to a lack of recognition and understanding of the very subtle behaviours of girls with ASD.

Possible characteristics of girls with ASD:

- Likes routine and dislikes trend.
- Quiet and shy.
- Fine motor difficulties.
- Sensory difficulties.
- Often compliant and passive.
- Will not ask for help.
- May avoid work in order to mask difficulties.
- Struggle with abstract concepts.
- Auditory processing difficulties.
- Explosive outbursts or meltdowns.
- Perfectionists - can lead to the pupil refusing to work or answer questions in case they get it wrong.
- Very determined and like to be in control.
- May mirror behaviour of other girls.
- May not have a strong sense of identity.
- Can often be socially immature and may befriend others who are younger, or appear younger.
- Try to control their peers and can get upset if they do not follow the rules.
- Wants someone to understand them.
- Mask emotions and feeling.
- Exhausted from constant social imitation and mirroring others.
- High anxiety levels.

Strategies – Girls ASD

- Select a partner to model behaviours.
- Use social stories to explain any fears.
- Extra-curricular activities that match any special interests.
- Show the pupil how to respond appropriately in social situations by using video and role play.
- Provide structured activities for unstructured times such as break and lunch.
- Support them by telling them that their reactions or feelings are normal, and that it is ok.
- Peer mentoring schemes for any bullying issues or problems with friendship.
- Pre-teaching of content of lessons so that the pupil has increased confidence in the lesson.
- Teach touch typing to help with writing skills.