



# Autism Awareness

## Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ Understand the challenges faced by school-age children with autism
- ✓ Discuss the various steps that can be taken to support the education of pupils with autism
- ✓ Help children with autism develop essential social skills in the classroom



# Autism Awareness

## What is Autism?

Autism has always been very difficult to define, in that it affects different people in different ways. One of the broader definitions of the condition describes Autism Spectrum Disorder as a developmental disability, that can affect the way the individual relates to and communicates with others. It can also affect the learning capacity of the individual in question and the extent to which conventional teaching methods are effective or otherwise.

### The Autistic Spectrum

Autism Spectrum Disorder - usually abbreviated to ASD - is the term used in reference to all of the variable forms of autism. Though every example of autism is fundamentally unique, those who are affected by the condition share similar difficulties with:

- Communicating and interacting with others socially
- The use of language and interpersonal skills
- Taking enjoyment and satisfaction from activities
- Dealing with everyday life without a set routine
- Expressing themselves and empathising with others

Another area in which children with an ASD vary significantly is by way of their intellect. Some children with autism are renowned for being exceptionally intelligent, who in many instances can be educated in mainstream schools alongside other pupils. However, some children with autism encounter major learning difficulties and require the support of special educators.

Teachers and teaching assistants are not expected to diagnose ASD directly, though often play an important role in the identification of the signs and symptoms of the condition. A few examples of which are as follows:

- Issues with social interactions:
  - A tendency to be aloof and have no real interest communicating or interacting with other people
  - A lack of desire to make friends or be part of the group
  - Enjoyment of social contact but no effort to maintain or initiate it
  - Unpredictable, unusual or inappropriate behaviours or responses in social situations
- Language and communication impairments:
  - Communication capabilities that lag significantly behind peers
  - Lack of desire to communicate, despite what appear to be competently developed communication skills
  - A tendency to communicate in non-standard ways, such as constantly asking questions, interrupting others or shouting out in class
  - The inability to understand concepts such as timing, taking turns in conversations, allowing others to speak and so on



- Difficulties understanding and empathising with the words and communications of peers and adults
- Restrictive behavioural range impairments:
  - The use of toys and learning/play materials in general in an unusual manner
  - Engaging in unusual behaviour like shouting, rocking, spinning in circles etc.
  - Indications of obsessive interests in certain activities/objects and an emotional or even aggressive aversion to others with no specific explanation
  - Difficulties with general organisation and planning
  - The inability to cope well with change - the individual in question may become anxious, upset or angry when their routine is altered
  - Diminished or no regard for the consequences of their actions, or appreciation for the importance of manner/social boundaries
  - An apparent inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy
- Further signs and symptoms displayed by children with an ASD:
  - Excessive and continuous clumsiness or motor control problems
  - Difficulties getting to grips with the basics of handwriting
  - Indications of extreme sensory sensitivity (light, noise, taste, smell, touch)
  - The inability or unwillingness to pay attention or make eye contact
  - A very limited attention span and inability to ignore distractions
  - Irregularities with sleeping, drinking and eating patterns
  - A tendency to interrupt and speak out of turn
  - Becoming angry, upset or aggressive when faced with disappointment
  - Indications of stress and anxiety when dealing with unfamiliar environments or unstructured situations
  - Difficulties with time management and the inability to meet deadlines

Of course, under no circumstances does any combination of the above signs and symptoms confirm a case of autism. Even with the support of an experienced professional, reaching a conclusive diagnosis where ASD is concerned can be surprisingly difficult.

However, it is the responsibility of the teacher and the teaching assistant to ensure any unusual behaviours or characteristics are brought to the attention of children's parents at the earliest possible stage. It will then be the decision of the parent as to whether things should be taken further.

### **Autism Awareness as a Teacher or Teaching Assistant**

The biggest challenge for teachers and teaching assistants working with children with an ASD is the way in which each and every case is unique. As a result, it is their responsibility to acknowledge and appreciate the fact that every child with an ASD will have their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

After which, it is a case of focusing on the child's strengths and providing the specialist support and assistance needed to attend to their weaknesses. Teachers and teaching assistants who wish to play a positive role in the lives of children with an ASD must therefore commit to the following:



- Building an active interest in autism through private study and developing a detailed knowledge of the implications of an ASD for those affected
- Getting to know the child's individual ASD and building a comprehensive profile of their strengths and weaknesses, in order to model their educational style accordingly
- Creating a personalised programme for the child in question in accordance with their social, behavioural and communication capabilities, to help them access the curriculum
- Keeping parents involved at all times and ensuring they are kept up to date with the child's progress, in accordance with their personalised programme
- Making sure all other teaching and administrative staff are aware of the child's unique needs and are in a position to provide the necessary support
- Continuously evaluating the child's progress and amending their personalised programme where necessary to ensure their continuous development

### **Additional Tips and Guidelines for Teaching Assistants**

- Treat every child with an ASD as a unique and invaluable individual, getting to know their individual strengths, their personality and the difficulties they are experiencing
- Always encourage a child with an ASD to explain their situation and communicate from their point of view, which can provide invaluable insights into their condition
- Keep things as clear and concise as possible when conversing with children with an ASD, eliminating all complicated and unnecessary language from the equation
- Try to keep all conversation and communication focused on what the child should do and should be doing, rather than what they shouldn't do and shouldn't be doing
- Always remember that children with an ASD often respond positively to structure and routine, so avoid springing surprises on them out of the blue
- Setting goals and targets that are achievable, measurable and time limited can be a great way of motivating children to take an interest in their development
- If you make any alterations to the child's personalised programme, ensure all other teachers and administrative staff who have contact with the child are informed accordingly
- Organise regular communication and in-person meetings with the child's parents or guardians, in order to discuss their progress and plan for the future
- Don't simply expect a child with an ASD to naturally develop social and interpersonal skills - *teach* them the social and interpersonal skills they need to get by
- Occasional (if not frequent) setbacks are all part and parcel of the process, so don't be discouraged if and when things become more challenging than expected
- A sense of humour and a personable character can work wonders when supporting and educating children with an ASD

### **Teachings Social Skills when Working with Children with an ASD**

As touched upon above, you cannot rely on children (in general) to develop social and interpersonal skills naturally. There will always be those who need direct support, assistance and even instruction to make measurable progress.

For children with an ASD, the development of social and interpersonal skills can be even more complex and

difficult. Indications of difficulties with social skills vary from one child to the next, though often present as problems talking and interacting with others, the inability to make eye contact, little or no interest in building friendships, inappropriate/unusual behaviours when interacting with others and so on. In many instances, problems with social interactions are most evident when the child in question is in a non-structured environmental situation, such as:

- When walking the corridors from one class to the next
- During lunchtimes and break periods
- Upon their arrival to school or when exiting the premises
- On the school bus or when school trips are taken

Social judgment is something children with an ASD often lack, which may present itself in a variety of ways. The following typically being the most common indicators of social judgment issues in children with suspected ASD:

- Repeatedly or inappropriately shouting out or interrupting during lessons
- Demonstrating no social status recognition, communicating with teachers and adults in the same way as their peers
- Making inappropriate comments or observations about the actions or appearances of other people, with no regard for the consequences
- The apparent inability to stray from rules or guidelines, without becoming angry, upset or emotional
- Indications that the individual in question cannot or would simply prefer not to initiate or maintain any close friendships
- The literal interpretation of language, with no apparent grasp of context

What's important to remember when working with children with an ASD is that their perceptions of the world around them and their own behaviour may be completely different to that of the teacher or teaching assistant. Hence, what may come across as shocking and frankly unacceptable behaviour may be interpreted as perfectly normal (or even amiable) on the part of the child with the ASD.

It is your desire and your ability to see the world from the perspective of the autistic child that will ultimately determine your capacity to support their growth and development. This isn't something that happens overnight, nor does it occur without plenty of commitment, patience and hard work.

### **Setting Up a Buddy System**

One of the most effective strategies for assisting children with an ASD in a social sense to set up a buddy system. This is where kind and caring peers are asked to 'buddy up' with the individual in question and provide them with help and support in social situations.

This may prove particularly helpful in the following instances:

- During break periods and lunch times
- When organising personal property/items before and after lessons
- When taking school trips or starting new subjects
- In group social activities and group work
- When moving from one location to the next

## Teaching Communication When Working with Children with an ASD

As is the case with social skills, children with an ASD often have very different capabilities when it comes to use of language and communication. Children with autism interpret and use language in a unique way, which can present one of the biggest challenges for teachers and parents alike.

The greater the difficulties the child has with communication and language, the more difficult it becomes for them to communicate their thoughts and feelings to those around them.

Language and communication difficulties vary from the extreme to the seemingly non-existent. Though where communication difficulties exist, they most often present in the form of the following:

- Difficulties understanding explanations or instructions, either due to misinterpretation of the message or the inability to stay focused on the communication
- An inability to decipher abstract concepts and ideas, instead interpreting the language literally. For example, raining cats and dogs - this would not be interpreted as heavy rain
- Trouble reading between the lines, particularly where sarcastic expressions or slang are used. If a person was to sarcastically say "Oh great" in response to something negative, children with the ASD could find this confusing
- A lack of interest or apparent respect where the viewpoints of others are concerned, perhaps joining conversations with no acknowledgement whatsoever of other speaker's contributions or sentiments
- Unnatural or unusual repetition, which in the case of children with an ASD may be an attempt to repair a breakdown in communication they have detected
- Disinterest or inability to focus when conversing as part of a group, perhaps due to a lack of awareness as to who exactly is speaking to who
- A tendency to attempt to bring conversations around to certain subjects of obsessional interest - i.e. the favourite topics the child wishes to talk about, even when it is inappropriate to do so
- Difficulties or an inability to request help where necessary. Children with an ASD are often able to identify when and where they need help, though may struggle to ask for it
- Interpretation of instructions as literal, which can result in confusion. "Watch the road" before crossing should instead be communicated as "Be careful when you cross the road and don't cross until it is safe to do so"
- Use of gestures, tone of voice and facial expressions can also be difficult for children with an ASD, who may struggle to both use them and interpret them.
- It is also not uncommon for children with an ASD to have a somewhat underdeveloped sense of humour, or a sense of humour that seems unusual or inappropriate.

## Helpful Guidelines for Teachers and Teaching Assistants

As before, the key to getting things right as a teacher or a teaching assistant lies in getting to know and the child and their unique communication capabilities at an in-depth level.

The following best-practice guidelines may prove helpful for anyone working with autistic (or suspected autistic) children who demonstrate communication and language difficulties:



- Use simple and unambiguous language that cannot be misinterpreted, avoiding anything like sarcasm or colloquialisms
- Visual supports can also be useful when communicating with children with an ASD, therefore should be brought in where appropriate
- Speak slowly and clearly, ensuring that the child knows you are communicating with them directly and that they have as much time as they need to respond
- Use the child's language as a basis for your own communications, ensuring you use words and phrases they can understand
- Teach the child new words on a continuous basis and make sure they know that they should ask you when they don't understand something
- Celebrate and praise their attempts to communicate, showing particular appreciation in instances where they struggle
- Develop exercises in conjunction with the teacher to help the child practice their communication skills at home
- Provide nurturing and empathetic support when a child with an ASD becomes upset or agitated, as communication difficulties can be extremely frustrating

### Dealing with Challenging Behaviours

Promoting good behaviour in the classroom is difficult when not every pupil has the same definition of what constitutes 'appropriate' or otherwise.

Teachers and teaching assistants may find that traditional approaches to promoting good behaviour and dealing with challenging behaviour can be difficult with children with an ASD for the following reasons among others:

- A child with an ASD may have unusual motivations and may attempt to please others in unusual ways
- Their difficulties with language and communication may make it difficult to convey your sentiments and to understand theirs
- Many children with an ASD have little to no understanding of 'cause and effect', meaning they don't understand the consequences of their actions
- The routine the child has established as part of their everyday life may incorporate negative habits, which they subsequently find difficult to break

Addressing behavioural problems when a child suffers from an ASD can be extremely challenging. However, the process can be simplified by first asking a series of questions:

- *Which of the child's difficulties may be causing the issue?*
- *At what times and in what situations does the problem occur?*
- *How frequently does the problem occur?*
- *What is the child's most likely interpretation of the behaviour?*
- *How would a typical peer of the child behave in the same situation?*
- *Is it an urgent or important issue to address?*
- *Why may the pupil be experiencing confusion about the issue?*
- *What would be the ideal outcome if the issue was addressed.*

## **An Action Plan for Identifying and Addressing Behavioural Issues**

### **1. Assess the specifics of the problem:**

- What events or activities lead to the problematic behaviour?
- How does the behaviour affect the child's education and progress?
- What are the main consequences of the behaviour?
- Where and when does the behaviour occur?
- Is the behaviour related to the presence of others?

### **2. Strategize for the resolution of the issue**

- Consult with the parents of the child to discuss their behaviour
- Talk to other teachers and teaching assistants who work with the child
- Collect and analyse the information you gather about the issue
- Observe the child and visualise a realistic outcome
- Engage the child with interesting activities and reward their efforts

### **3. Consider the child's surroundings and make alterations accordingly**

- Remove distractions if you believe they are an issue
- Offer a safe and quiet place for the child to take breaks
- Use social stories to help the child manage their behaviour
- Plan in advance for how to handle the behaviour when it occurs
- Encourage "time outs" and never confront the child directly

### **4. Monitor and Assess the Progress of the Situation**

- Keep detailed records of instances of the behaviour for future reference
- Provide written or pictorial reminders to help the child manage their behaviour
- Teach social skills directly, rather than expecting them to develop naturally
- Encourage the child to communicate and to ask for help when they need it
- Teach leisure and play skills that may assist the child's development

## **A Final Note on Flexibility**

One of the most important things to remember as a teacher or teaching assistant is that while you can demonstrate flexibility, children with an ASD cannot. They can grow, learn, develop and evolve, but may not currently have the capacity to see or interpret the world from any perspective other than their own. Working with children with an ASD can be incredibly rewarding, though can also be quite challenging for new and inexperienced teaching assistants. This is where your confidence, your character and your commitment to each and every pupil you work with will pay dividends - both for you and for the pupils you support.