

## Autism Spectrum Disorder: What is it?

Autism is a complex developmental disability involving a defect in the functioning of the brain. It is a lifelong disability with no cure. Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, or ASDs, can suffer from a 'triad of impairments' which affect their ability to communicate socially and understand the world around them. Furthermore, they will have problems with 'inner language' and imagination.

With structured help, children with ASDs can grow up to achieve their full potential.

ASDs, which include Asperger Syndrome as well as high-functioning autism, are not, however, related to a lack of language or intellect. Children with these conditions are usually of average or above-average intelligence, in fact.

Let's examine the three areas of difficulty mentioned above.

[Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) may not have all the impairments but all have some of them, the particular mix being individual to the child, and the child must have impairments in all three areas for a diagnosis of an ASD to be made. Impairments seen in, for example, only two out of the three areas may lead to a diagnosis of 'atypical autism' or 'pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified'.]

### Social communication

The use of gestures is poorly understood in children with ASDs. They may not understand, for example, what pointing a finger at something or someone means or that a beckoning finger means 'come here' or that waving can be used to attract attention or to say hello and goodbye.

Other body language is also hard for children with ASDs to understand. Certain posture, for example, that is acceptable at home such as sprawling on the sofa when watching television will

not be acceptable in school. There it is important to sit up straight and look the teacher in the eye – which they find difficult - to indicate they are paying attention.

Reading facial expressions is another problem area, along with obtaining information from the tone of voice. Expressions of happiness, sadness or anger with either of these methods can pass children by, and they won't respond appropriately, which can lead to further confusion or greater anger.

Children with ASDs can also find it hard to communicate with friends or class mates, preferring to talk to adults as they are more predictable and are more likely to be able to anticipate their needs. However, this leads to social isolation. And if they don't find interacting with their peers rewarding, they will lack the motivation to keep trying to communicate, further isolating them. This does not help them learn the social skills they so desperately need and they are more likely to be ridiculed and rejected. This can lead to anxiety in social situations - even social phobia - and nervous tics which are involuntary sounds or movements. It also lays the children open to being bullied.

Children with ASDs find it difficult to express themselves, particularly how they feel.

### [Social understanding](#)

Children with ASDs find it hard to choose topics to talk about or to make other decisions. However, they may talk incessantly about topics that are of special interest to them regardless of whether the person listening is interested. This can make them boring and add to their social isolation.

Another difficulty children with ASDs can have is taking what is said literally. This makes it impossible for them to interpret jokes, double meanings, idioms and teasing. And making small talk can be very hard – children with ASDs don't see the point of it. And they may be unaware of

why some topics of conversation are unsuitable. For example, understanding that there are taboo subjects – has your child ever embarrassed you in this way? - or that topics of conversation they can have with their friends are different to those they can have with adults.

They don't function well in group situations, not understanding, for instance, that they should wait their turn or that they should not interrupt someone else who is speaking. They won't see the difference in social gatherings, say, between a party and a funeral, which will lead to them talking at normal volume about things that are inappropriate to the occasion. They may also not realise that during a visit to the theatre or cinema they are required to sit quietly so as not to spoil the film for others.

### Imagination and inner language

There can also be an impairment of imagination, though this does include creative abilities, which are often abundant. But they have trouble visualising what will happen next, or what the consequences of their actions might be. Consequently they may find it hard to take part in imaginative play such as pretending to be different people or imagining that a tree house is a space ship.

They may have trouble in understanding how other people are feeling, even if those feelings are explained. A lack of empathy or even sympathy is very common.

The child's failure to see the sequencing of tasks necessary for getting ready to go to school makes life difficult for himself and his parents. There is difficulty - or even inability - to make plans for future events, even when these are spoken about frequently.

There may be difficulties carrying out sensory or motor tasks affecting, for instance, their ability to write if they have fine motor impairment, or clumsiness - tripping and falling - if they have gross motor impairment. And there can be unnatural sensitivity to smell, light, sound, touch

and taste, which can lead to sleeping difficulties, or experiencing pain when wearing certain clothes or strong aversions to certain foods.

### ASDs and anxiety

Children with ASDs often suffer from extreme anxiety, panic, phobias and other anxiety disorders because of their condition. They are also very prone to depression and may have obsessive compulsive behaviour.

Routine is vital in children with ASDs; they can be anxious if it changes, being unable to predict what might happen next. But the idea of routine for a child with an ASD does not just mean getting up at the same time each day, having breakfast and then going to school. It may mean getting up at 7.00, getting dressed at 7.05 - and the clothes need to be selected and put out the night before, and may need to be the same clothes every day - at 7.20, eating breakfast - which may be exactly the same every day and so on. Packed lunches need to be carefully chosen and the selection the same each week such as: Mondays - chicken, Tuesdays - cheese etc.

Any unexpected event that interferes with their routine can cause immense stress to children with ASDs. Their reaction to stress and anxiety may be to impose even greater routines or rituals in their life in order to cope with their distress.

The reason autism is called a 'spectrum' disorder is that the term covers the mildly affected to the most severely affected. In mild cases, a diagnosis may go unrecognised for years. It can occasionally be first diagnosed in adults, at which time the differences they had felt since early childhood fall neatly into place.

More than four times as many boys are affected by ASDs than girls and, although the exact cause is not known, genetics do play a part.

If you think your child might have an ASD ask your GP to refer the child to a specialist. If the diagnosis is positive, your child will have access to specialist education with teachers experienced in dealing with ASDs.

### Useful resources

*Social Awareness Skills for Children* by Márianna Csóti (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £19.95) A social skills course for professionals and parents to use with socially awkward children and children with special needs, aged 7 to 16.

*School Phobia, Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children* by Márianna Csóti (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £16.95) A book explaining how to help children with anxiety related to attending school. Some attention is given specifically to children with autism spectrum disorders.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (Vintage, £6.99) An award winning book of fiction about a boy with Asperger Syndrome.

*Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome: A User Guide to Adolescence* by Luke Jackson (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £12.95) Written by a teenager with Asperger Syndrome for other teenagers.

The National Autistic Society: Tel: 0845 070 4004 Website: <http://www.nas.org.uk/>

Márianna Csóti's website is at [www.mariannacsoti.co.uk](http://www.mariannacsoti.co.uk)