Parents of children on the Autism Spectrum

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), usually called autism, is something children are born with. Autism means that the way children may think about and experience the world is different to most people. This means they can behave differently to most people and have different strengths and difficulties. For example, some autism characteristics (things they think, feel and do) can make it hard for children to express themselves in social situations, but they may also be particularly knowledgeable and passionate about topics that interest them.

Autism is highly variable; the word 'spectrum' refers to how autism is experienced differently by different people. Autism is considered a spectrum because it's different for every autistic person, some autistic people might need more support than others to live the lives they want to lead. The way autism affects them can change as they grow and develop, and experience different environments.

Autism is always present from birth, but it might not be recognised or diagnosed until adulthood. Early intervention, in the form of support for their individual needs, can be helpful for autistic children.

Even if they aren't diagnosed until adulthood, getting a diagnosis can be very helpful for identifying their strengths and the things they struggle with.

Is there a ‘cure’ for autism?

There is no known 'cure' for autism. **We also believe that autism does not need a 'cure' and should be seen as a difference, not a disadvantage.**

This does not mean that autistic people do not face challenges, but with the right support in place, they are more than capable of living fulfilling and happy lives.

Because autism is a 'spectrum' condition, it affects different people in different ways. It is therefore very difficult to predict how an autistic person will develop over time. Each person is different, and an intervention or coping strategy which works well with one person may not be appropriate or effective with another.

The characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations. Two people with the same diagnosis can have a very different profile of needs and skills.

Characteristics of autism

Every autistic person is different and has different experiences. However, there are some characteristics that are common in autistic people.

The way these characteristics show themselves can change with age, and also with the situation they are in.

For example:

- the way they use language and communicate might be different to most people
- they may use facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures (hand and body movements)
- making and maintaining friendships might be difficult for them
- they may be good at seeing patterns or solutions, and be good at seeing solutions to problems that other people might not
- they might have set ways of doing things, and find it difficult to do them differently
- they may have good attention to detail, and be good at spotting mistakes
- they might be passionately interested in certain things, and as a result learn a large amount about them in a short time. (These interests can change throughout their life).
- they might avoid or seek out certain sensations, like loud noises or specific textures more than most people, and experience them more strongly
- there might be some foods they particularly enjoy and eat a lot of, and others that they can't be around due to their texture or smell
- autistic people can be very determined and driven, and keep going with tasks or problems when other people may give up
- they might find they're always determined to make sure things are perfect
- it can be difficult for autistic people to work in groups where there isn't clear communication about what they're expected to do

There are a number of other possible signs that a healthcare professional will look for when assessing if someone is autistic.

Diagnosing autism

The signs of autism can be different depending on the person and how old they are.

Autistic traits - meaning things that autistic people often do, think, and feel - are often shared by people who don't have autism too.

To be diagnosed with autism, a person has to have a lot of autistic traits from birth, and those traits need to have a big effect on their life. In order to be diagnosed with autism, those traits must cause what a healthcare professional would call 'significant difficulties' in their day-to-day life due to their autistic traits and need to use their own ways of overcoming those difficulties.

Being in a supportive environment makes a big difference to an autistic person's wellbeing and quality of life.

Causes of autism

The exact cause of autism is unknown, but researchers think it's at least partly genetic – that autism can run in the family. However, autism can also develop when there's no family history. There's no way to predict whether a child will be autistic, even if one or both of their parents are autistic.

Living with autism

Autistic people can be happy and healthy in the right environment.

Many autistic people do need additional understanding or support to overcome the challenges caused by having autistic characteristics in a society where most people don't have them.

There's no cure for autism, and most autistic people wouldn't want to be cured even if it was possible. Many autistic people feel autism is part of their identity, and not something to be cured or treated.

Related conditions

Because of the difficulties they can experience, autistic people may need treatment or support for other conditions including:

- low mood
- anxiety
- sleep problems
- eating problems

High stress levels vs Tantrums

When an autistic person becomes stressed and isn't able to use or benefit from their coping strategies they become overwhelmed.

Knowing your child will help you determine if their stress levels are high or if they are having a tantrum. Some people will refer to high stress level behaviour as a meltdown. Having said that, all behaviour is a form of communication.

It's important for parents of autistic children to be aware that a meltdown isn't a tantrum. A tantrum is something that a child can control, and tantrums often happen because a child wants something. A meltdown or shutdown isn't something an autistic person can control, and it's caused by being overwhelmed.

During the state of high stress levels, an autistic person might try to make themselves feel less overwhelmed. This can include doing things like:

- trying to get away from people, for example by running away or hiding (fight or flight)
- trying to get people away from them by shouting, screaming, hitting, or acting aggressively

During a shutdown, an autistic person might try to block everything out by not responding to anything or anyone around them (freeze).

What to do

If someone is having a meltdown, or not responding to you, don't judge them. It can make a world of difference to an autistic person and their carers.

Give them some time - it can take a while to recover from information or sensory overload.

Calmly - ask them if they're ok, but bear in mind they'll need more time to respond than you might expect.

Make space – try to create a quiet, safe space as best you can.

Challenging behaviour

Autistic people can display challenging behaviour if they're in the wrong environment. While it can be challenging for the people around them, this behaviour is often a result of distress or frustration, particularly if an autistic person has difficulty communicating.

Behaviour that challenges others is usually a way for someone to get their needs met when they don't have any other way to do so. It's not 'bad' behaviour, or intended to cause harm. This kind of behaviour is most common in children, or people who find it hard to communicate their needs.

Effective communication about their needs and finding ways to have those needs met can be helpful in reducing the distress that can lead to behaviour that challenges.

Behaviour that challenges can also be caused by:

- trying to meet sensory needs, wanting to do something because it feels nice
- wanting something , being hungry or wanting to play with a toy
- needing assistance or attention because they're bored or want help with something they are struggling with.
- trying to escape an environment or the people around them but doing so in a way that can be dangerous or harmful.

Behaviour that people can find challenging includes:

- being destructive, breaking things
- being disruptive, making noise in class or throwing things
- self-harm
- aggression

Getting the right environment

Environment is important for autistic people. There are ways you can adapt and improve your environment to make it as comfortable and supportive as possible for you or your child.

Common changes to an environment that can help autistic people include:

- sensory changes - being given a quiet space to work, being able to use sensory toys like fidget spinners, or being allowed to make noises while working
- communication changes - using very clear language, allowing additional time to ask questions, or using visual communication such as PECS as well as written words
- routine – keeping to a regular routine and giving warning of any changes as far in advance as possible

Help and Support for you and your child

If you require any more support for either yourself or you child, please speak to either: -

Mr Aston	-	Deputy Head Teacher / Inclusion Manager
Mrs Clay	-	Sensory & Nurture Leader/Autism Champion.