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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet is aimed at teachers and school staff with little or no experience of working with children who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The booklet is divided into two sections, one concentrating on classroom strategies and the second focusing on playground issues.

The strategies are also covered in point form for ease of reference.

## WHAT IS AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER?

Children with an ASD have difficulty in three areas:

Communication skills

Social skills

Flexible thinking, leading to difficulties in areas like imaginative play.

ASD is used as an umbrella term to include children with a range of diagnoses such as autism, atypical autism, high functioning autism, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD).

Some children with ASD might also have difficulty in processing sensory input. This might affect their sense of touch, smell, vision, hearing, proprioception and vestibular sensations.

Proprioception provides feedback about bone joint pressure. This provides the body with information about how to react appropriately to the surrounding environment.

Vestibular sensation provides the sense of balance and is important for maintaining body posture.


There are theories that some of the unusual behaviours we see in ASD, such as aversion to textures, motor planning difficulties and self stimulatory behaviour could be due to difficulties in sensory perception.

Because the number of boys with an ASD far outnumbers girls, we have used 'he' throughout this booklet.





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### HOW DOES ASD AFFECT STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Difficulties in these areas mean that children with an ASD might have problems with understanding and following instructions.

The child may appear to cope with language but this could be because the child is following situational or contextual clues.

For example, when you say 'bring your coat' as an instruction to the whole class, the child may not have understood the instruction. However, he brings his coat because he copies the other children.

Perhaps the child has learnt the routine through exposure and repetition, so lining up provides the contextual clue in this situation.

The same child may not respond to the same instruction in a different context, such as when everyone is sitting down.

The child may understand simple commands but may have difficulties with long or complicated instructions.

Most children with an ASD also have difficulty in shifting their attention from one activity to another. They need time to process the given instruction.

Repeating the instruction may not help such a student. This just adds more information that needs to be processed. This may cause more frustration for the child.

Because of this, children with an ASD may follow some instructions, while being unable to follow others. They may also follow them at some times and not others. Due to this inconsistency, teachers may feel that the child is being naughty or is choosing not to do something when he is capable of it. But as explained above this is not necessarily so.



### COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES OF CHILDREN WITH ASD

Children with an ASD may have difficulty explaining their needs or answering a verbal question. If the words or question structure is changed, the child might have difficulty in answering, despite knowing the answer.

Children with an ASD also find it difficult to retell an incident or event. Some children might not be able to relate to stories or topics which need imagination. They may also want to relate the stories in more painstaking detail, being unable to sift relevant from irrelevant information

Yet other children with an ASD will be able to talk about their favourite topics at length – like dinosaurs and space ships.

While talking about their favourite topics, children with an ASD may ‘talk at’ people rather than ‘talk to’ people. They may seem indifferent to other people’s interest or expect the listener to ask set questions for them each time the subject arises.

Children with an ASD often understand language literally and do not understand implied meanings. With phrases such as ‘would you come and sit here?’ a child with an ASD may think that there is a choice and answer ‘no.’

Similarly they find it difficult to understand body language and implied meanings, such as facial expressions and raising your voice when you want them to stop doing something.

Children with an ASD may tune out of background noise, especially when concentrating on something, and may appear selectively deaf. Saying their name before providing instructions or asking a question can help them to tune back in.



### CLASSROOM RULES

Due to their difficulties with social skills, children with an ASD may find it hard to follow classroom rules or display socially appropriate behaviour. Some may not understand the concept of personal belongings. They may use other children’s possessions or enter their personal space without permission. They could also be unaware of the feelings of other people, and the effect of their own behaviour on others.


On the other hand, due to the unpredictability of the world, some children might want to follow the rules rigidly and might get distressed by changes in routine. They might also become dependent on certain adults, peers or objects in order to cope with this.

Some children get very anxious and may display inappropriate behaviours as a sign of anxiety.

Oh, dear. I should have asked him to wipe the board with the eraser.



*Children with an ASD often understand language literally and do not understand implied meanings.*



### DIFFICULTIES WITH SOCIAL SKILLS

#### DEVELOPING PLAY SKILLS

Following the rules of a game is not easy for a child with an ASD. They may have difficulty in using learnt skills in a new situation, with new material or even a new person. Due to their sensory dysfunction, some children may resist certain activities or situations such as playing with sand, gluing activities or playing games involving physical contact.

Children with an ASD may find it difficult to attend to a directed task. Some children also find it difficult to concentrate on more than one piece of information at a time. So social situations where they have to read the nonverbal communication such as body language and also listen to what the speaker is saying could be very difficult for them.

#### HOW CAN I HELP A PUPIL WITH AN ASD IN MY CLASS?

Make sure you get the child's attention before you give instructions. You could call the child's name, go close to the child, tap on the shoulder – but be aware that the child may find touch aversive – or use an agreed signal to gain their attention.

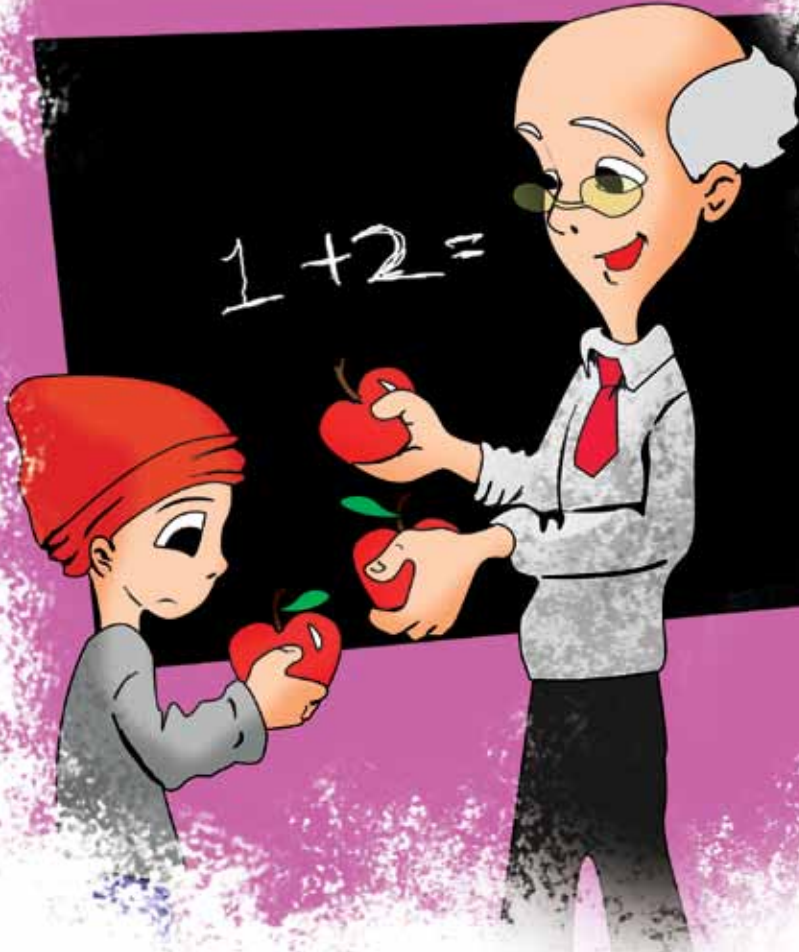
People with an ASD learn better when they 'see' things. Try to include demonstrations, activities and pictures in your lesson. Be careful to find realistic pictures as they might not be able to relate to unrealistic pictures. Visual timetables and supports are very helpful in preparing them for changes and explaining information.

Use simple language, not complicated words. Try to use a visual clue or symbol along with the words so that the instruction is easier to follow.

Avoid non-literal language such as metaphor, sarcasm and idioms. Make sure that you say what you mean. At the same time, spend time teaching the meaning of idioms and metaphors. The child may like to compile a glossary of the commonest terms they struggle with.

Provide time for the student to process the information after you have given an instruction. A general guideline is counting to ten in your mind after giving an instruction. This usually provides the student adequate time to understand what has been said.

When introducing a new topic or teaching an abstract concept such as grief or mourning, try to make the lesson more explicit by relating to the child's experiences or providing the child such an experience.



*People with an ASD learn better when they 'see' things. Try to include demonstrations, activities and pictures in your lesson.*



The golden rule is to proceed from concrete to abstract.

Try to reinforce a new topic in as many situations as possible. Children with an ASD might find it difficult to generalise a learnt skill or to apply a known skill in a new way. For example, if you are teaching addition, teach the child to add with objects, numbers and finger counting. Additions should be vertically as well as horizontally.

It is important to give the child a quiet, distraction-free learning area. Too many pictures, bright colours and noise could be difficult for some children to cope with. Similarly if you are using pictures to teach, try to avoid complicated pictures or pictures with too much information. These could be difficult for the child with ASD to understand.

Provide the child with an ASD with clear consequences for rule-breaking. Remember that time out can be rewarding and so could reinforce a behaviour rather than act as a punishment.

Have consistent classroom rules and routines so that the pupil with an ASD understands the behaviour expected in a particular situation. Make sure that these rules are explained explicitly through visual means.

You can also develop some of your own strategies.

Visual timetables provide a structure to the child's daily routine and the child knows what is going to happen, reducing anxiety. This helps the child to focus on the learning process.

Spend time helping the child to develop social skills and to understand the feelings of other people.

There are a number of ready-made strategies available on the market, such as Social Stories™ and comic strip conversations. A Social Story™ is a story that explains the social situation to the child from their perspective and provides strategies to deal with that situation.

Comic strip conversations help the child to understand other people's perspective of a situation.

Make sure that you include the views of the family so that the developed social skills are socially and culturally appropriate in both the situations.

In spite of these strategies, some students might find it difficult to sit still in a class for long periods of time. They might need some space and physical activity to burn their energy to be able to concentrate on their work.

Behaviours and needs of pupils with an ASD vary from one child to another, as with any child.

A strategy that has worked with one child in a particular situation may not work with another child. Or for that matter even with the same child in a different situation!

Teaching is a dynamic, two-way process. It is not just the pupil with an ASD who will learn. You as a teacher will improve your skills if you are sensitive to the needs of children with an ASD.

Take these suggestions as a starting point and then follow your instincts. The best way to make an autism friendly class is by placing yourself in the pupil's shoes and looking at the world from their perspective. Reading personal experiences of people with an ASD can also help you develop this insight.

## A QUICK GUIDE TO AN AUTISM FRIENDLY CLASSROOM

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
Communication and language skills.	Difficulty in understanding and following instructions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Get the attention of the child before giving instructions.</li> <li>* Use simple language with visual prompts.</li> <li>* Provide time to process the information.</li> <li>* Use activities, demonstrations and pictures.</li> </ul>
Communication and language skills.	Difficulty in explaining their needs or answering a question.  ☒ Difficulty in retelling an incident.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Provide visual supports to help in communication and recollection of personal experiences.</li> <li>* Use closed questions rather than open ended questions.</li> </ul>
Social skills.	No concept of personal belongings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Spend time in developing understanding of the concepts of private and public.</li> <li>* Use visual prompts to support this.</li> </ul>