



# Introduction to Autism

Autism isn't something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside... Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive. It colours every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person. (Sinclair, 1993.)

Autism is a lifelong condition affecting the way the person relates to and communicates with people and the world around them. It is described as a spectrum condition, indicating that, whilst all individuals with autism share particular differences, their Autism will affect each person in distinct ways; the specific nature of how and to what extent Autism affects each individual is unique.

The spectrum of Autism includes children who have additional learning difficulties who may be pre verbal or have limited verbal communication, through to children with average or high levels of intelligence and a wide ranging vocabulary but struggle with social communication, interaction and relationships.

Current estimates suggest that there are 1 in 100 children with Autism in the UK.

The Autism Education Trust describes Autism in terms of difference not deficit. A different way of looking at the world to neuro typical children or adults.

The four areas of difference are:

1. **Social communication and language:** Differences in understanding language and communication, sarcasm, tone of voice, facial expression, jokes, and gestures.
2. **Social and emotional understanding:** Differences in understanding social behaviour, understanding the feelings of others, starting and maintaining conversations and making and maintaining friendships.
3. **Information processing and interests:** Differences in planning, perception, generalising and predicting, understanding concepts, transitions and passions for interest.

4. **Sensory processing:** Differences in perceiving and processing sensory information. Hypo sensitivity (low), hyper sensitivity (high), to touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing, vestibular (inner ear) and proprioceptive (body) feedback.

To develop good practice and effective inclusion for pupils with Autism, practitioners need to not only consider the Autistic pupils' way of communicating and relating to others but also adjust the way they act, relate to and communicate with the pupil.

(NAS, 2015; AET, 2012).

FURTHER INFORMATION:

National Autistic Society (NAS): <http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism.aspx>

Autism Education Trust (AET): <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/about-aet/what-is-autism.aspx>

P. Taylor: A Beginner's Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorders: Essential Information for Parents and Professionals.

## The Four Areas of Difference

### Communication

Many pupils with autism have extraordinary language skills and huge vocabularies compared to their peers, particularly when they are talking about areas of special interest to them. They are also likely to have a strong preference for direct, clear language and particularly technical language. However some will also struggle significantly with verbal communication, they may be preverbal or significantly delayed in developing functional communication, they may be echolalic (repeating words and phrases spoken to them or heard around them) or they may be able to recite exactly the dialogue from their favourite TV shows, but struggle to talk with any communicative intent. It is however particularly important to remember that lack of expressive language does not necessarily translate to lack of receptive language. Many autistic pupils do not talk, not because they don't understand language or have the vocabulary to do so, but because they struggle to know what to say, to understand the value of communication or because they lack the motor co-ordination skills to generate speech. I have worked with many pupils who were unable to communicate verbally, but capable of forming long sentences using either Picture Exchange Communication System or PECS (the exchange of laminated symbols on sentence strips) or using assistive technology such as Proloque to go.

Many pupils with autism will acquire most of their language, not through listening to the people around them, but through listening to their favourite TV shows, which are often more predictable and understandable for them. As a result, a child who loves American TV shows may speak with a strong American accent.

Regardless of ability the main aspects of communication that autistic pupils are likely to be challenged by are indirect communication and non-verbal communication. By indirect communication, I mean sarcasm, teasing, double meanings, banter, idioms etc. For many these forms of communication are confusing and even distressing.

Non-verbal communication refers to facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, gestures, proximity etc and some studies have suggested that upwards of 70% of communication is non-verbal. That is 70% of communication that is potentially lost to autistic pupils.

### **Social Understanding**

Pupils with autism will find understanding the unwritten rules of neuro-typical social behaviour difficult to understand. Many autistic pupils are excellent at following written rules and enjoy doing so, as written rules rarely change and provide consistency and predictability. However, the issue with social rules is that they change constantly depending on context; who you are with, where you are, how old you are and this makes them incredibly complex.

This area of difference is also linked to a theory of autism called 'the double empathy' problem. This theory simply states that because neuro-typical and autistic brains work so differently from each other, the neuro-typical and autistic experience of the world is also completely different. Therefore it is a challenging for autistic people to understand the thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions of neuro-typical people and challenging for neuro-typical people to understand the thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions of autistic people.

### **Information processing and interests**

This is maybe the most complex area of difference, so we can break it down into 3 parts:

1. Pupils with autism tend to have very intense special interests. Their neuro-typical peers may like lots of different things, but in a shallow way, they may not be passionate about anything. Whereas for autistic pupils interests may be narrow, but very deep and very passionate. Many pupils with autism will say that their special interest is so intense and powerful, that it can be extremely hard to stop thinking about it and focus on something else. Trying to repress that interest during the school day will not work, it will just build up and up in that pupil's head, until there is no room for anything else. Most autistic pupils will need an outlet to focus on their special interest for a short period at agreed points during their school day.
2. Pupils with autism thrive of consistency, routine and familiarity, so may struggle significantly to manage change and transition. Particularly if it is sudden or

unexpected. Therefore, we use visual timetables and try very hard to ensure they are accurate and up to date and that we follow them to the letter wherever possible. It is also why we try to give advanced warning of both small and big changes whenever possible.

3. The third aspect of this difference relates to thinking and learning styles. The majority of pupils with autism will be;
  - a) Strongly visual learners; they will absorb information much more readily if it is presented visually; using written words or symbols. That adage 'in one ear and out the other' is often very much the case for autistic pupils.
  - b) Mono-processors; capable of extraordinary feats of focused attention. But struggling to divide their attention between 2 things (looking and listening for example) and struggling to switch attention from one thing to another.
  - c) Blessed with extremely good long term memory, particularly for things of interest to them, but struggling with short term memory and working memory; working memory being the ability to link memories, for example in order to complete sequences of activities. Have you ever had an autistic pupil, who in spite of spending a whole year completing the same routine every single day, still forgets most of the steps in the sequence? That is working memory at play!
  - d) They are also likely to experience a processing delay. So they may be able to come up with a really fabulous answer to a question in class, but will take considerably longer to get there. Often the processing delay can be so significant, that you will think they have ignored you or switched off. The temptation will be to repeat the question, but in doing so, you will make them have to begin processing all over again!

### **Sensory Processing**

All Autistic pupils experience sensory differences to a greater or lesser degree. For some this can be hugely debilitating, particularly in busy environments. They will often experience significant over sensitivity (hyper-sensitivity) to everyday sights, sounds smells, touches and tastes. Hyper-sensitive pupils may be the ones who cover their ears in noisy environments, who will squish themselves into a corner and go all foetal when they find themselves in busy rooms or who when you brush past them in a school corridor, will flinch and go ouch, as if you have hurt them – because you have.

Whilst the pupils who are hypo-sensitive are the ones who simply cannot sit still; they bounce up and down and wiggle around on their chairs, they have to reach out and touch and fiddle with the things all around them. They do all these things because they have to, to get enough feedback from the world around them to feel comfortable in their own bodies.

You will also have pupils who are a combination of both, for example hyper to noise, but hypo to touch.

In relation to autism, we also talk about 3 other senses;

Balance: which can be hyper or hypo; hyper pupils will struggle with co-ordination and appear clumsy, they will often be risk averse, for example avoiding being off the ground. Whilst hypo pupils are likely to be fearless and may do risky things such as jumping from high climbing frames. They may feel the need to be upside down or to climb a lot!

Proprioception: this is your awareness of where your body is in relation to itself and the world around it. It is what allows us to tie our shoelaces without looking or clap our hands behind our backs for example. Autistic people often have hypo-sensitive proprioception. They might struggle to feel their bottom on a chair, so they sit on their feet to get more feedback. Or they might find it hard to know where their heads end and the sky begins, so they wear hats to help with this. Or they might toe walk (walking on their tiptoes) as this gives them stronger feedback from the ground below them, by concentrating the feedback into a smaller surface area.

Interoception: this is the ability to feel what is going on inside your body and can be hyper or hypo in autistic people, though in my experience hypo is more common. So the pupil may struggle to know when they need the toilet, when they are full or hungry, when they are tired or unwell or they may be over responsive to all these feelings.