

Understanding AUTISM



Contents

1) What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

2) The Importance of Understanding ASD

3) Facts and Figures

4) Social Interaction Difficulties

- a) Difficulties Making Friends
- b) Preference for Solitary Play
- c) Understanding Social Cues

5) Repetitive Behaviours

- a) Physical Repetitive Movements
- b) Repetitive Vocalisations
- c) Obsessive Interests
- d) Routine

6. Communication Difficulties

- a) Delayed Speech Development
- b) Difficulty Maintaining Conversations
- c) Non-Verbal Communication Difficulties

7. Sensory Sensitivity

- a) Sound
- b) Texture
- c) Light
- d) Taste and Smell

8. Diverse Cognitive Abilities

- a) Focus and Attention
- b) Executive Functioning

Self-Assessment Activity

1. Place three objects on the floor, with significant distance between each
2. Explain to participants these mean “agree”, “neutral” and “disagree,” and that each participant should move towards each object in answer to the questions you ask.
3. Begin with a series of questions that act as icebreakers (i.e. how confident would you feel about singing in public). Build up to asking questions relevant to understanding autism (i.e. would you feel confident in delivering a presentation on the symptoms of autism?)
4. This activity will allow you to gauge the efficacy of your presentation by delivering it again at the end with the same questions about autism, measuring improvements to knowledge and skills on the topics of the presentation.

What is ASD?

Facts About Autism



We want to have friends.



We enjoy playing games.



We can learn new things.



We might not understand how you are feeling.



Please tell us if something is going to change.



Words can be confusing for us.



Pictures help us to understand.



We might not like loud noises.



Be patient with us.



If we are upset, we need a quiet space to calm down.

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioural challenges. The term "spectrum" in ASD reflects the wide variation in challenges and strengths possessed by each person with autism.

Importance of Understanding ASD



AUTISM

Around 1 in 82 children have ASD in Europe*, and many children remain undiagnosed**, meaning you will all likely encounter a child with ASD in education.

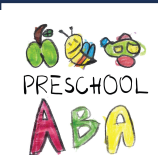
As early school teachers, you will facilitate the first experiences of children with ASD in society, which will influence their social participation, quality of life, and future success.

*Paz MP. (2018) *Autism Spectrum Disorders in the European Union*. European Commission

**Brugha, T., Spiers, N., Bankart, J., Cooper, S., McManus, S., Scott, F. & Tyrer, F. (2016). Epidemiology of autism in adults across age groups and ability levels. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 209(6), 498-503. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.115.174649>

Assessment: Can you name three different symptoms associated with ASD?

Common Signs of ASD

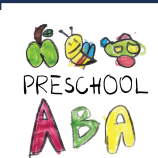


Social Interaction Difficulties



- Social interaction difficulties are common among children with ASD
- These impact their ability to navigate social environments effectively.
- At school, these challenges can manifest in various ways, affecting peer relationships, classroom participation, and group activities.

What can these look like in a school setting?



Social Interaction Difficulties: Difficulties Making Friends



Difficulty Initiating Interactions: A child might want to make friends but doesn't know how to start a conversation or enter a play scenario, leading to isolation or playing alone by default.



One-Sided Conversations: Conversations might be dominated by their interests, making it challenging for a reciprocal dialogue to develop, which can deter peers from future interactions.

Social Interaction Difficulties: Difficulties Making Friends



Misreading Social Situations: Difficulty reading social cues can lead to misinterpretations of peer intentions, such as seeing a neutral or friendly approach as hostile, hindering the formation of friendships.

Social Interaction Difficulties: Preference for Solitary Play



Withdrawal in Group Settings: During group activities or circle time, the child may withdraw to the periphery of the group or engage in solitary play instead of joining in, even when activities are designed to be inclusive and engaging for all.

Social Interaction Difficulties: Understanding Social Cues



Difficulty with Eye Contact:

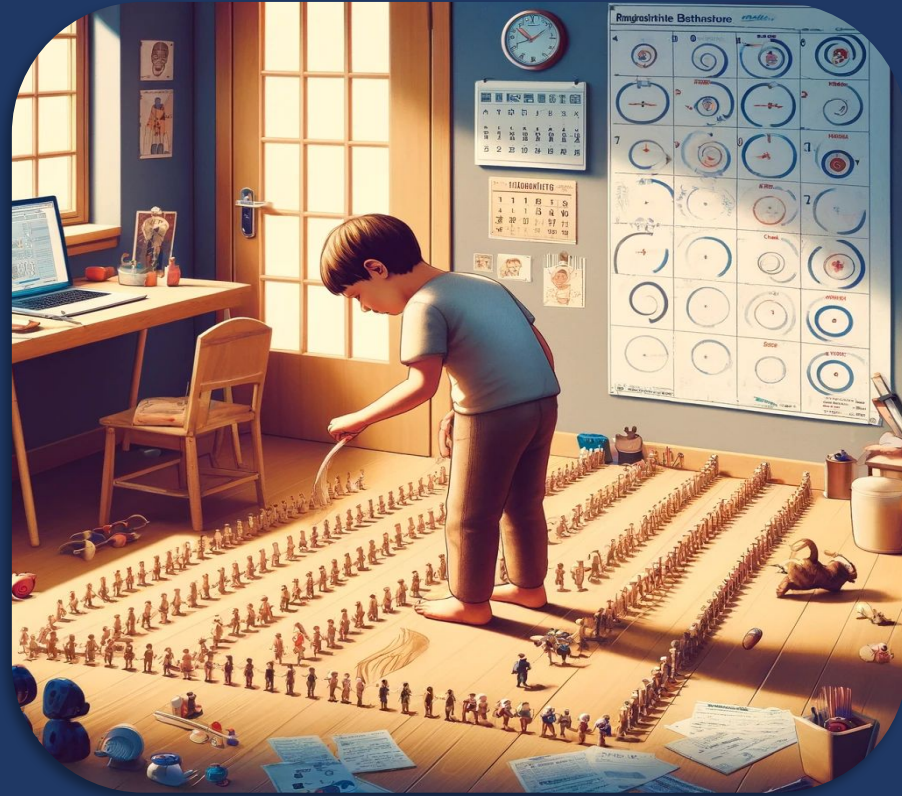
Some children may avoid eye contact because it's uncomfortable or overwhelming, which can be misinterpreted by peers and adults as disinterest or rudeness.



Taking Things Literally:

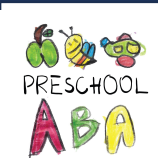
Children with ASD might struggle with understanding sarcasm, jokes, or idiomatic expressions, leading to confusion or literal interpretations of figurative language.

Repetitive Behaviours



Engaging in repetitive activities or speech, a strong need for routine, and specific interests.

What can these look like in a school setting?



Repetitive Behaviours: Physical Repetitive Movements

- **Rocking:** Moving the whole body or torso back and forth while sitting or standing.
- **Hand-flapping:** Rapidly moving the hands or fingers up and down or in front of the face.
- **Head-banging:** Gently or forcefully banging the head against a surface or with the hands.

Repetitive Behaviours: Obsessive Interests



Fixation on Particular Objects: Showing intense interest in specific items, such as wheels on toys, certain textures, or parts of objects rather than the whole.



Collecting and Sorting: Gathering similar objects, lining them up meticulously, or sorting them according to specific criteria (colour, size, shape).

Repetitive Behaviours: Routine

Insistence on Sameness:
Becoming upset if routines are changed or if items are not in their usual place.

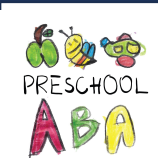


Repetitive Checking:
Frequently checking on certain objects or situations to ensure they are in a specific state or condition.

Sensory Sensitivity

- Sensory sensitivities are a common aspect of ASD
- Individuals can experience heightened or reduced responses to sensory input.
- These sensitivities can significantly affect a child's learning environment and comfort in the classroom.

What can these look like in a school setting?



Sensory Sensitivity: Sound



•Heightened Sensitivity:

Some children may find everyday sounds overwhelming or painful, such as the ringing of a school bell, the hum of fluorescent lighting, or the noise from group activities. This can lead to distress, covering ears, or avoiding noisy areas.



•Reduced Sensitivity:

Some children may seek out specific sounds or appear indifferent to loud noises and consequently not respond to verbal cues or directions.

Sensory Sensitivity: Texture



•**Avoidance or Preference of Activities:** Activities involving playdough, sand, or finger paint might be distressing for some, while others may prefer these textures, engaging with them exclusively.



•**Discomfort with Clothing:** Certain fabrics or tags in clothing might be irritating, causing distraction or discomfort, leading to a preference for wearing specific, softer materials.

Sensory Sensitivity: Light



- **Preference for Dim or Natural Lighting:** Children might seek out spaces with dimmer lighting or show a preference for natural light, finding it more comforting or easier to focus in.



- **Difficulty with Bright or Fluorescent Lighting:** Some children may find bright or flickering lights uncomfortable or distracting, leading to squinting, headaches, or efforts to avoid brightly lit areas.

Sensory Sensitivity: Taste and Smell



Selective Eating: Sensitivities to the taste, smell, or texture of foods can result in a very selective diet, affecting participation in group snack times or school meals.



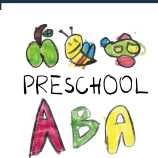
Reactions to Odours: Children may react strongly to certain smells, such as food, cleaning products, or perfumes, which can lead to avoidance behaviours or distress.

Diverse Cognitive Abilities

Cognitive abilities can vary: from a child who has significant communication impairment, high incidents of challenging behaviour and difficulty picking up new skills, to a child with above-average intellectual ability and limited challenges in social interaction.



What can these look like in a school setting?



Diverse Cognitive Abilities: Intelligence

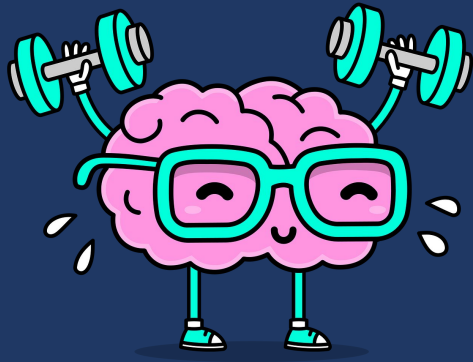


•**Above-Average Intelligence:** Children may demonstrate exceptional abilities in specific areas such as maths or art, often referred to as "splinter skills" or "islets of ability."



•**Challenges in Intellectual Functioning:** Others may face difficulties with traditional learning metrics and cognitive tasks, requiring more foundational support.

Diverse Cognitive Abilities: Attention and Focus



•**Hyper-focus on Areas of Interest:** Children with ASD may show intense focus on subjects of personal interest, sometimes at the exclusion of other activities or learning areas.



•**Difficulties with Sustained Attention:** Conversely, some may struggle to focus on tasks that are not of immediate interest or find it hard to switch attention between activities.

Diverse Cognitive Abilities: Executive Functioning



- **Challenges with Planning and Organisation:** Difficulties with executive functioning can affect a child's ability to organise tasks, follow multi-step directions, and manage time effectively.

Communication Challenges



Delayed speech development, difficulty maintaining conversations, and sometimes, non-verbal communication.

Communication Challenges: Delayed Speech Development



- **Limited Use of Words:** A child might have a noticeably smaller vocabulary compared to peers and use words sparingly or not at all, relying more on gestures or pointing to communicate needs and desires. Younger children may have limited spoken words compared to peers, or they may not speak at all.

Communication Challenges: Difficulty Maintaining Conversations

- **Misunderstanding Social Rules of Conversation:** A child may interrupt or talk over others, not out of rudeness but due to a misunderstanding of turn-taking cues in conversations. They may also not respond to their name, or ignore attempts to engage in back-and-forth conversation

Communication Challenges: Non-Verbal Communication Difficulties



Difficulty Interpreting Body Language: They may struggle to understand what others are communicating through their body language, missing cues that indicate emotions, invitations to play, or the need for space.

Communication Challenges: Non-Verbal Communication Difficulties

Unusual Tone of Voice:

Speech might have an unusual tone, pitch, or rhythm. For instance, speech patterns might be monotone, overly formal, or sound like they are mimicking a character from TV or a book.

Limited Use of Gestures: A child might not use common gestures such as waving goodbye, pointing to objects of interest, or nodding to indicate yes or no, which can make their communications harder to interpret.

CONCLUSION

- Children with ASD can exhibit a diverse range of behaviours at school in response to the symptoms of autism that impact their friendships, educational participation and overall happiness.
- Teachers must be equipped with evidence-based tools and resources to manage these behaviours, with a view to ensuring children have a positive experience of early education.
- In the next presentations, you will learn more about how to manage these behaviours to ensure inclusive education for children with ASD.

Thank you for listening!

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