

COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES RESEARCH PROJECT (CLDD)

AUTISM

What is autism?

Autism is also known as the autistic spectrum, or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). At one end are those who have moderate or severe learning difficulties as well as being autistic. These children are sometimes referred to as having classic autism (or Kanner's autism). At the other end are those who have high functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome, who will be average or above in ability and whose autism will not be as evident.

There is a recognised 'triad of impairments' relating to the autistic spectrum. This means that children who are autistic will have difficulty with:

1 Social Communication

Some may not speak at all, or only use odd words. Some will have an unusual sound to their voice and an unusual way of speaking, while others will speak fluently, but mainly about the topics that interest them.

2 Social interaction

Some will appear to be living in a world of their own and ignoring other people. Some will seem content with their own company, while others will want to make friends but not understand the give and take of friendship, or how to pick up what others are thinking.

3 Social Flexibility of thought; using the imagination

These children feel safer when sticking to rigid routines. They do not like sudden changes. They will often want to do the same activity over and over again and have a very narrow range of interests. Some will line up objects, such as cars, rather than playing with them.

In addition, people with autism are often hyposensitive (meaning they are under-sensitive), or hypersensitive (over-sensitive) to sights, sounds, smells, tastes or touch. Sometimes, the same student may be both hypersensitive and hyposensitive at different times. In addition, they may be overwhelmed by too much information coming at them all at once, for instance, screaming in distress when bombarded with the sights, smells and noise of a supermarket or even a busy classroom.

Supporting students on the autistic spectrum

While all those who have autism will have the same triad of impairments, they will be affected to different degrees and in different ways. So the approaches and strategies suggested below will apply to some students but not others.

1 General approaches

There is a number of recognised approaches for helping children with autism. Some people will want to keep to one method, while others take ideas from several approaches. The best known are:

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- **Daily life therapy (Higashi)** – this approach emphasises group learning in the context of a programme which includes vigorous physical activity to develop both strength and concentration.
- **Applied behavioural analysis (Lovaas)** – this approach focuses on two main areas of development – teaching specified skills and managing behaviours.
- **Intensive Interaction** – this is an approach in which the learner leads and directs interactions and the teacher responds to and joins in with the learner.
- **TEACCH structured teaching approach** – in this approach, visual and physical structured environments are used to support students' focus and learning.
- **SPELL (Structure, Positive, Empathy, Low arousal, Links)** – this is an eclectic approach.
- **Social Stories** – this is an approach that helps to develop social skills through the use of stories, which show (either in words or pictures) how to behave in various situations.

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2 Specific strategies

- i) Children with autism are more likely to be visual learners, so try to present information visually rather than relying on too much talk.
- ii) Use the children's visual strengths (visual timetables, pictures, objects and symbols) and combine this with a very structured approach to learning, breaking down each task into small steps.
- iii) Give the children a designated place for work, perhaps a workstation, where they can be screened off from other distractions. Set out the classroom with clearly defined areas for each activity.
- iv) Strive for independence and autonomy by setting out tasks in the same, clear manner, so that students can tackle them with minimal support.
- v) Use any method students can manage to establish communication, including alternative methods such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) for those who do not speak. For example, a child can ask for what they want by showing someone else an object of reference, picture, symbol, TOBI etc.
- vi) Have several short breaks through the day for physical activity, which can help to keep children calm, as well as providing plenty of opportunities for active learning.
- vii) Reduce the danger of sensory overload by restricting displays and background noise. Be aware that assemblies, music lessons, etc, will be painful for some, and that they need to be introduced to them very gradually.
- viii) Be responsive to the children's likes and dislikes and use their interests to further their learning.

Finally, remember that strategies will be most effective when there is consistency between all the settings and individuals supporting the child.