

# Classroom and playground: support for children with autism spectrum disorders

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism.

Over half a million people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over two million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day.

Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. Which means that many of these two million people get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need.

*Together, we are going to change this.*

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**Children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can find school difficult for a number of reasons, generally related to difficulties with communication, social skills and sensory sensitivity. However, there is plenty that teachers, support staff and other pupils can do to help.**

This booklet is aimed at teachers and school staff with little or no experience of working with children who have an ASD, although we hope it may also contain some useful ideas for more experienced staff.

It is divided into two sections with one concentrating on classroom strategies, and the second on playground issues. The strategies are also covered in point form (pages 6-7) for ease of reference.

## What is an autism spectrum disorder?

An ASD is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, others. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.

The children and young people with an ASD who you support will have difficulty in three areas:

- > communication skills
- > social skills
- > flexible thinking, leading to difficulties in areas like imaginative play.

ASD is an umbrella term but the children you support may have specific diagnoses such as autism, Asperger syndrome, high-functioning autism or pervasive developmental disorder (PDD).



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The cause of ASD is unknown although research suggests that a combination of factors – genetic and environmental – may account for changes in brain development. It appears to affect more boys than girls.

## Sensory sensitivity

Some children with an ASD have difficulty processing sensory input (often referred to as ‘having sensory sensitivity’). This might affect one or more of their seven senses: touch, taste, smell, vision, hearing, balance (vestibular), and body awareness (proprioception). For example, some children have very sensitive hearing and may find noise – even background noise – extremely loud, distracting or even painful.

Proprioception provides feedback about bone joint pressure. This gives our bodies information about how to react to the surrounding environment, for example how to walk across a room while avoiding obstacles.

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

There are theories that some of the behaviours we see in autism, such as aversion to textures, difficulty with some motor skills, and self-stimulatory behaviour (such as hand-flapping or rocking) could be due to sensory issues.

## How does ASD affect pupils in the classroom?

Some of the main difficulties that children with an ASD can face in the classroom include:

- > communicating with teachers, support staff or other pupils
- > following instructions
- > following classroom rules
- > knowing how to behave
- > concentrating on a task.

We talk about each of these issues below.

### Communication difficulties

Children with an ASD may have difficulty explaining their needs or answering a verbal question. Or they may only understand a question if it is posed in a certain way: if the words or question structure are changed, the child might have trouble answering, despite knowing the answer.

Children with an ASD also find it difficult to re-tell an incident or event – some may want to relate stories in painstaking detail, being unable to sift relevant from irrelevant information. Some children might not be able to relate to stories or topics that ask them to imagine situations, people or places outside of their own experiences.

Yet other children with an ASD will be able to talk about their favourite topic, such as dinosaurs or spaceships, at length. While talking about their favourite topic, children with an ASD may talk **at** people rather than to them. They may seem indifferent to other people’s levels of interest or expect the listener to ask set questions for them each time the subject arises.

Children with an ASD often take 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 messages conveyed by body language and tone of voice, 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 appear to be ignoring you. Saying their name before giving instructions or asking a question can help them to tune back in.

### Following instructions

Because of difficulties with communication, processing language and ‘generalising’ skills, children with an ASD might have problems understanding and following instructions. A child may appear to understand instructions, but may in fact be 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 an instruction. You could try using the six-second rule: count to six seconds in your head after you give an instruction, then repeat it using the same words. Try not to change the words: doing so means the child has to process more information and may become frustrated.

You may find that children with an ASD follow some instructions but are unable to follow others. They may also follow them at some times and not others. Due to this inconsistency, teachers may feel that a child is being naughty or is choosing not to do something when they are capable of it. But as we have explained, this is not necessarily the case.

### Classroom rules and social skills

Due to their difficulties with social skills, children with an ASD may find it hard to follow classroom rules or understand how they should behave. 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.

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

On the other hand, some children might want to follow the rules rigidly – this is a way of coping

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with the unpredictability of the world. Changes in routine might be distressing. They might also become dependent on certain adults, peers or objects in order to cope. Some children get very anxious and you may see this in their behaviour.

## Concentrating on tasks

Children with an ASD may find it difficult to attend to a task (for example, they may find the classroom environment distracting and be unable to concentrate). Equally, children may find it hard to quickly switch between tasks. In this case, a tool such as a visual timetable can help as it allows children to see what they will be doing, when. They can then prepare for the change in tasks.

Some children also find it difficult to concentrate on more than one piece of information at a time. So a situation where they have to listen to what someone is saying, as well as reading non-verbal information such as body language, could be very difficult for them.

## How can I help a pupil with an ASD in my class?

There is plenty that teachers and school staff can do to make lessons, and classrooms, more ASD-friendly. Often it's a case of making some very simple adjustments. Here are some suggestions.

- › Make sure you get the child's attention before you give instructions. They will then be aware that you are talking to them. You could call the child's name, go close to the child, tap them on the shoulder (but be aware that the child may find touch aversive) or use an agreed signal to gain their attention.

- › Use simple language, not complicated words. Try using visual clues or symbols along with the words as this may make your instructions easier to follow. People with an ASD often find visual information extremely helpful.
- › Give the child time to process information after you have given an instruction. Try using the six-second rule: count to six in your mind after giving an instruction. This usually gives pupils enough time to understand what has been said.
- › Avoid non-literal language such as metaphors, sarcasm and idioms. Make sure that you say what you mean. Having said this, you could spend some time teaching a child the meaning of some common idioms and metaphors. The child may like to compile a list of common terms they struggle with.
- › 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 ones. Visual timetables and supports are very helpful in preparing them for changes and explaining information.
- › When introducing a new topic or teaching an abstract concept (for example, emotions, which can be hard things for children to understand as we cannot 'see' them), make the lesson more explicit by relating to the child's experiences. Or try to give the child such an experience – after all, it's easier to understand happiness when you're feeling it. The golden rule is to proceed from concrete (what the child knows) to abstract (what you are asking them to imagine).
- › Try to teach 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 skill in a new way. For example, if you are teaching addition, teach the child to add up using objects, numbers and finger counting. Teach horizontal as well as vertical addition. Don't expect a child with an ASD to simply pick these things up, or to intuitively understand that horizontal and vertical additions are two ways of carrying out the same task.

- › Children with an ASD will benefit from a quiet, distraction-free learning area. Because of their sensory issues, too much noise, movement, bright colours and pictures, etc may 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 a child with an ASD to understand.
- › Have consistent classroom rules and routines so that pupils with an ASD understand what you expect of them and how they should behave. Make sure that these rules are explained explicitly using visual supports.
- › Have clear consequences for rule-breaking – these should apply to the whole class. For children with an ASD, 'time out' can be rewarding and could be used to acknowledge and reinforce good behaviour, rather than as a punishment.
- › Visual timetables provide structure and help children with an ASD to see what is going to happen, when. This reduces uncertainty and anxiety and helps them to focus instead on learning.
- › Spend time helping the child to develop social skills and to understand other people's feelings.
- › Social Stories™ and comic strip conversations can help you if you are teaching social skills. A Social Story™ is a short story, often with pictures, that

explains a social situation to a child and offers strategies to deal with that situation. Comic strip conversations help a child to understand other people's perspectives on a particular situation. See 'Recommended reading' (page 11) for more about Social Stories and comic strip conversations.

You can also develop some of your own strategies. Make sure you include the child's family's views so that the skills you are developing are socially and culturally appropriate at home, as well as at school.

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 off energy and be able to concentrate on their work.

The behaviour 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'll also 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 create an ASD-friendly class is by placing yourself in the pupil's shoes and looking at the world from their perspective. Reading about the personal experiences of people with an ASD can also help you develop this insight.

Enjoy the journey!

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## A quick guide to an ASD-friendly classroom

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
<b>Communication and language skills</b>	Difficulty understanding and following instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Get the child's attention 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>
	Difficulty explaining their needs or answering a question Difficulty re-telling 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>
<b>Social skills</b>	No concept of personal belongings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Spend time developing understanding of the concepts of private and public.</li> <li>› Use visual prompts to support this.</li> </ul>
<b>Social skills and flexible thinking</b>	Difficulty following classroom rules, and knowing what behaviour is socially appropriate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Have consistent, explicit classroom rules.</li> <li>› Use Social Stories™ to explain the 'social rules' of a given situation, and how people are expected to behave.</li> </ul>
	Finds it difficult to deal with sudden changes, tends to become anxious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Give advance notice of any changes whenever you can.</li> <li>› Use visual timetables.</li> <li>› Set clear rules and consequences.</li> </ul>
<b>Flexible thinking</b>	Difficulty understanding how other people feel, and the effect of their own behaviour on other people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Work on understanding emotions.</li> <li>› Use strategies such as comic strip conversations (see page 5).</li> </ul>

Areas of difficulty	Effects on classroom	Strategies
<b>Flexible thinking</b>	Difficulty relating to a story or topic that requires imagination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Teach a new topic from concrete (what the child knows) to abstract (what you are asking them to imagine).</li> <li>› Relate to the child's personal experiences.</li> </ul>
	Difficulty using a particular skill outside of the situation where they learnt it ('generalisation')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Teach each skill in all the possible contexts and in different ways.</li> <li>› Include generalisation as part of teaching every topic/concept.</li> </ul>
<b>Sensory perception and flexible thinking</b>	Resistance to certain activities, materials or situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Prepare for the new activity or situation in advance so the child knows a bit about what to expect.</li> <li>› Introduce a new sensation (for example, paint) gradually.</li> <li>› Offer another activity if the pupil cannot overcome a sensory difficulty.</li> <li>› Introduce new sensory experiences using the child's interests, eg messy play making aliens to get used to slimy textures.</li> </ul>
<b>Sensory perception and social skills</b>	Finds it difficult to concentrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Try to create a distraction-free learning environment.</li> <li>› Reduce the social demands on the child while they're learning.</li> <li>› Permit time out if the child is becoming over-stimulated.</li> </ul>
<b>Social skills, flexible thinking, and communication</b>	Difficulty developing play skills and following the rules of games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Identify which skills the child needs to develop and focus on teaching these, eg turn-taking or negotiating.</li> <li>› Simplify the rules of games.</li> <li>› Introduce a circle of friends or buddy system to help the child to build relationships.</li> </ul>

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## Playtime and the playground

### Difficulties in the playground

Lunchtime and playtime are difficult for many pupils with an ASD in mainstream schools. Unstructured time can provoke anxiety as children may not be sure what to do, or how to participate in games and activities. The noise and bustle of a playground can also be very intimidating for children with an ASD.

Because of difficulties with communication and social skills, children with an ASD may not really know how to approach another child and initiate a game with them. They may use inappropriate behaviour, such as snatching another child's toy to start a chasing game. Some may not understand the concept of personal belongings and could use other children's possessions or intrude on their personal space.

Developing play skills and following the rules of a game is not easy for a child with an ASD. If children have learnt a skill in class (for example, how to take turns), they may have difficulty transferring (or 'generalising') this skill to another situation where things are different: new people, materials, toys or surroundings.

On the other hand, due to the unpredictability of the playground, some children insist on sameness: for example, always playing the same game, acting out the same scene, or following rules rigidly. They may become distressed or anxious if things change. Just as in the classroom, some children may become dependent on certain adults, peers or objects to cope with the unpredictability of playtime.

Children with an ASD do not always find it easy to understand other people's emotions and feelings; or the effect of their behaviour on others. What appears to be inappropriate or insensitive behaviour stems from their fundamental difficulties with emotional recognition and social interaction.

It is sometimes difficult to know whether a child with an ASD wants to interact socially at lunchtime and playtime. You should try to create opportunities for children to learn to play in the playground (we suggest some options below). That way, if a child still chooses to play alone, you know it is their choice.

### Making things easier in the playground

You may need to work with pupils with an ASD on play skills such as turn-taking, understanding rules and negotiation.

The ideas that follow centre on creating an environment where pupils with an ASD can interact socially, and cope with lunchtime and playtime while they are learning these skills.

All the ideas can benefit other pupils in your school, as well as those with an ASD.

### Mentors

Many primary schools assign their Year 5 or 6 pupils the responsibility of looking after vulnerable children in the playground. Sometimes, these pupils may have special names such as guardian angels, mentors or playground cops. They could wear a hat, sash or badge so that other children are aware of their role.

The pupils chosen for mentoring will need training to understand their responsibilities, which could include maintaining playground discipline or

helping children with no playmates to engage in some kind of play activity.

Mentoring can help vulnerable pupils and also develop the confidence of the mentors themselves. It also means that other children play a part in supporting pupils with an ASD.

### Friendship stop

A specific bench or area in the playground could be identified as the friendship stop. A signpost or board could indicate the purpose of the friendship stop. Any child who does not have a friend to play with can go to the friendship stop, then playground support assistants can set up a game to help them interact with other children.

If your school already has guardian angels, they could be trained to monitor the friendship stop as well.

### Buddy system

Buddy systems can be very effective in Key Stages 1 and 2. They are the first step towards setting up a 'circle of friends' (see opposite).

First, teachers spend some time with their class talking about the different strengths and abilities that everyone has, how some children may nonetheless need a bit of support at certain times, and how you can offer support in a sensitive way.

Then, teachers choose some children from their class to be buddies for a pupil with an ASD during free time. It's important to involve the pupil with an ASD when making your choice, otherwise they may resist being with the buddies.

Limit the number of buddies you choose – five or six children is a good number. This gives the child

with an ASD (as well as the buddies) a bit of variety, while providing opportunities for natural friendships to form.

To make the buddies feel special, you might give them a special buddy badge, cap or sticker.

Specify the ground rules about being a buddy. For example:

- › before I help my buddy with an ASD I will ask their permission
- › I'll listen to the needs of my buddy with an ASD
- › I'll seek help from an adult if there are any problems.

Be careful that buddies do not start feeling burdened by their responsibility.

### Circle of friends

A circle of friends is a more formal version of the buddy system. Again, it's a good idea to explain the strengths and needs of a pupil with an ASD to your class, then invite pupils to be part of a child's circle of friends. Pupils with an ASD won't necessarily be in the classroom at this time, but make sure they know that the class will be discussing them and trying to help them.

Usually, pupils are keen to volunteer to be part of a circle of friends. Make sure that the size of the circle is not too big. An ideal size will be six to eight children.

If the class bully volunteers to be part of the circle, let him. You have won half the battle already.

Once the circle has been formed, teachers typically conduct weekly meetings where the circle, including

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the child with an ASD, comes up with strategies to help. However, you will slowly start taking a back seat, aiming to reduce the frequency of these formal meetings after about ten weeks.

The ultimate aim is to help a child with an ASD to develop friendships and for other pupils in your class to understand the nature of the difficulties that children with an ASD face, as well as the things they're good at.

## Lunchtime clubs and quiet areas

For some children with an ASD, going out and playing in the playground may be overwhelming. They may need a quiet zone in the playground, or the school.

In the quiet zone, you might have some structured activities on offer, as some children with an ASD find unstructured time difficult to cope with.

Lunchtime clubs can be a good idea for older children, for example computer or music clubs. This kind of club can give pupils with an ASD the chance to enjoy activities they're good at, and share their knowledge with other children with similar interests.

Interacting with a group of people with similar interests will make pupils feel more accepted, and hopefully build their confidence, self-esteem, and understanding of the give-and-take nature of friendships.

## Other options for free time

In spite of trying ideas such as buddy systems, the circle of friends and lunchtime clubs, some pupils with an ASD may not want to be part of a social group, and need time by themselves as they find social interaction too demanding. If you have tried to develop friendships and you can see that it is a pupil's choice to spend time alone, allow them to do this.

Some children may like to help teachers set up for lessons, rather than spending all of their free time in the playground. If this is possible in your school, it could be another option.

## Written by Prithvi Perepa

## Recommended reading

Many of the books on this list are available to buy from our website. We receive 5% of the sale price from all the books we sell through [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Attwood, T. (2008).** *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Barratt, P. et al (2001).** *Developing pupils' social communication skills*. London: David Fulton. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Beaney, J. and Kershaw, P. (2003).** *Inclusion in the primary classroom: support materials for children with autistic spectrum disorders*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Gray, C. (2002).** *My social stories book*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Available from: [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Hannah, L. (2001).** *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Knott, F. and Dunlop, A-W. (2007).** *Developing social interaction and understanding: a resource for working with children and young people with autism*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Murrell, D. (2001).** *Tobin learns to make friends*. Future Horizons Inc. Available from: [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council (1998).** *Asperger syndrome – practical strategies for the classroom: a teacher's guide*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Sainsbury, C. (2000).** *Martian in the playground*. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishing Ltd. Available from: [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**The National Autistic Society.** *The sensory world of autism*. Available to download from: [www.autism.org.uk/sensory](http://www.autism.org.uk/sensory)

**The National Autistic Society.** *Social stories and comic strip conversations*. Available to download from [www.autism.org.uk/socialstories](http://www.autism.org.uk/socialstories)

**The National Autistic Society.** *Visual supports*. Available to download from: [www.autism.org.uk/visualsupports](http://www.autism.org.uk/visualsupports)

**Welton, J. (2004).** *What did you say? What do you mean? An illustrated guide to understanding metaphors*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Available from: [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Whitaker, P. (2001).** *Challenging behaviour and autism: making sense, making progress*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)