

4j. What is Autism?

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder. There are several different forms of autism. Each child is different, so spending time getting to know them, and their individual profile will be crucial as the behaviours and support strategies will vary from child to child.

The three main characteristics of people with autism are:

- **Social:** difficulty relating to others and understanding unwritten rules.
- **Communication:** difficulty in communicating (some may communicate in a non-verbal way).
- **Thought and imagination:** difficulty with thinking flexibly e.g. how to cope with changes to routines.

How can you identify girls with Autism in your classroom?

Girls with Autism may:

- have obsessions or intense interests
- show ritualistic/repetitive behaviour that affects their ability to take part in school
- have 'inappropriate' eye contact such as avoiding looking at you or staring
- have difficulty with communicating (some children may not talk at all)
- lack social awareness and talk at people rather than having reciprocal conversations
- take more time to process information
- have a rigid expectation that other children should adhere to the rules of play
- have difficulty making and keeping friendships
- have difficulty with engaging in imaginative play
- dislike doing things differently, resist change, or need a lot of preparation for change
- highly sensitive to some sensory stimuli (e.g. light, noise, taste, smell, touch), very low sensitivity to others, and a low threshold to sensory overload
- enjoy spinning objects or flapping their hands
- harm themselves, or display challenging behaviour such as biting, pinching or kicking
- behave aggressively towards other children
- experience intense anxiety
- have difficulty with organising, sequencing and prioritising
- lack awareness of danger
- appear to be of an average or above average intelligence, but unable to use it academically.



What can you do to help learners with autism?

Because all children with autism are very different it is important to get to know them well and use this to inform your teaching. However, there are some general principles that can be applied to make your Hub more effective in supporting girls with autism.

Physical

- Make the structure and sequence of your activity sessions explicit for the girl. Use a visual (pictorial) timetable to show what will be happening. Refer to this during the sessions. This will help her to understand your routines and expectations, and to deal with any changes that you indicate on the timetable.
- If possible, use a routine which has been mutually agreed. Make sure that you prepare her by talking through any change to her routine.
- Have an agreed safe and quiet place within the Hub for autistic learners to go to when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli. For example, some children with autism are sensitive to noise, and will be unable to learn during noisy activities. Consider which spaces within the Hub work best for them, for example during singing or role play activities. Check that they are able to let you know when they feel uncomfortable.

Social

- Keep instructions and other communications simple and allow time for them to process information.
- Young people with autism may not fully understand social games and activities, so check their understanding beforehand. For example, for role play or imaginative activities. They may not understand idioms and jokes.
- Deal with any bullying promptly. If a girl is unable to say what happened, then it may help to ask her to draw a picture of an incident.
- Keep a behaviour diary – this will help you identify aspects of classroom life that a girl finds especially difficult. This can help you to learn to identify things that may ‘trigger’ anxiety.
- Allow autistic girls to have a time out card or exit pass to indicate to teaching staff that they are feeling anxious and need to leave the immediate space.
- Establish good communication with parents/carers. They know their child best and may be able to suggest interventions to use.

Activities

- Be predictable for the autistic girl. The visual timetable will really help this.
- Plan how you support her to engage in group work. You might build on specific activities she enjoys. Begin with activities that are brief and easily achieved. You can gradually extend and develop these over time.
- If a child has a preferred activity, such as playing with a specific object, this can be used as an effective reward for the completion of a task. This arrangement can be included in the visual timetable.
- Include the option of extra breaks within your activity plans.
- Use visual aids, such as photos/pictures and real objects, within your activities. For example, where possible, when teaching reading, relate new words to real objects and actions.

A key point to remember is that each child is an individual and what works for one learner with autism may not work for another.

References

Adapted from: Viv East and Linda Evans (2006 edition) *At a Glance – A practical guide to Children's Special Needs*

The National Autistic Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/recognising-autism.aspx> (accessed 14th September 2018)

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources:

Extracted text from National Autistic Society website: "Recognising autism and planning the right support" and "In the classroom". National Autistic Society <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

© The Open University, May 2020



Except for third party materials and otherwise stated, this content is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 license:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Adapted for the SAGE project from the GATE-GEC Sierra Leone project, Disability Directory, September 2018

<http://www.open.ac.uk/about/international-development/projects-and-programmes/gate-girls-access-education>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2579>

Re-shared under CC-BY-SA