

15. What is Autism?

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder. There are a number of different forms of autism.

Each child is different, 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 pupils with autism in your classroom?

Pupils with autism may:

- Have obsessions or intense interests
- Show ritualistic or 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 any changes
- Have very high sensitivity 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 other forms of 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 in your classroom to help pupils with autism?

- Use a routine they have created or which has been mutually agreed
- Make sure that you prepare them by talking through any change to their routine
- Use visual supports (for example, a timetable with pictures or symbols) to help them better understand their routine and the school day
- Keep instructions and other communications simple and allow time for them to process information
- Consider your classroom environment and think about how you can make it more comfortable. For example, a pupil who struggles to block out background noise may benefit from wearing ear plugs
- Deal with any bullying promptly. If a pupil is unable to say what happened then it may help to ask them to draw a picture of an incident
- Keep a behaviour diary – this will help you identify aspects of classroom life that a pupil finds especially difficult
- Have an agreed safe and quiet place for autistic pupils to go to when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli. This shouldn't be the same place as where pupils are sent as a form of punishment
- Allow autistic pupils to have a time out card or exit pass to indicate to teaching staff that they are feeling anxious and need to leave the classroom
- Establish good communication with parents/carers. They know their child best and may be able to suggest interventions to use.

A key point to remember is that each child is an individual and what works for one autistic pupil 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*, London: Continuum and

The National Autistic Society

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

Acknowledgements

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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/>

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