

What is autism?

Autism is often referred to as a hidden condition as the child may appear to be like any other. However, autism affects how the brain functions and how a pupil **perceives, processes, understands and responds** to information. This effect is not always obvious to others.

Pupils on the autism spectrum can be affected in three areas, known as the triad of impairments:

- **Social and emotional understanding:** Children on the autism spectrum all have difficulty understanding social behaviour and conventions. They are also less able to recognise their emotions and those of others.
- **Communication and language:** Children on the autism spectrum have problems understanding communication and language, and in developing and using effective communication and language skills including speech, gesture, facial expressions and intonation.
- **Flexibility of thought and behaviour:** Children on the autism spectrum have difficulty problem solving and in knowing how to adapt when a familiar situation is changed.

A fourth area, differences in sensory perception, may also affect pupils on the autism spectrum.

The three main areas affected all need to be present for a diagnosis to be made.

Pupils on the autistic spectrum are often very different even though they all have needs in the three areas. Some pupils are very able intellectually, whereas others have considerable learning difficulties arising from their autism.

How can we identify Autism?

Characteristics to look out for...

- Lack of speech, or delayed or deviant speech, although some have fluent speech and language from an early age
- Social avoidance or unusual social behaviour
- Lack of pointing to draw attention and lack of shared attention with others
- Unusual play in particular unusual social play
- Resistance to change in familiar routines
- Difficulties in relating to peers and adults
- Unusual communication and conversations
- Strong focus on particular activities or interests.

For a child with Autism, school can be a very challenging environment. Pupils may face...

- Difficulty communicating effectively with others
- Problems listening and attending to things which hold little interest for them
- Pressure to be sociable when they want time alone and no space to get away
- Difficulties understanding and gaging their own emotions and those of others
- A lack of friends; teasing and bullying
- Difficulty understanding and accepting the opinions of others
- The impact of sensory issues
- Difficulties understanding abstract language and concepts

- Difficulties with personal organisation.

"Understanding social is like doing quadratic equations in my head."

(Temple Grandin)

How Can a Parent Support a Child with Autism?

- Know your child. The school and staff should be well informed about the needs of the pupils. It may be useful to have a home/school diary to communicate with your child's teachers.
- Prepare your child for change and transition- have a visual time table, use social stories to explain what might happen, act out scenarios, have options.
- Keep communication clear- short instructions, clear, mean what you say- beware that children on the autistic spectrum can take communication quite literal- i.e. wash your hands in the toilet!.
- Don't allow special interests to disrupt- use them to your advantage- base activities around the interest, or use as a reward (y) to get x completed. Give your child a set time in the day to talk or interact with a special interest so that it doesn't dominate at home.
- Set up communication systems - feelings chart, feelings diary, time to talk, time out space. Not all children verbalise their feelings.
- Help your child with organisation- checklists, keyring with pictures of things needed, visual timetable, homework written down clearly.

ADHD

It's normal for children to occasionally forget their homework, daydream during class, act without thinking or get fidgety at the dinner table. But inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity are also signs of attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD), which can affect your child's ability to learn and get along with others.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder that appears in early childhood. You may know it by the name attention deficit disorder, or ADD. ADD/ADHD makes it difficult for people to inhibit their spontaneous responses—responses that can involve everything from movement to speech to attentiveness.

The three primary characteristics of ADD/ADHD are inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. The signs and symptoms a child with attention deficit disorder has depends on which characteristics predominate.

Symptoms of inattention:

- Doesn't pay attention to details
- Makes careless mistakes
- Has trouble staying focused; is easily distracted
- Appears not to listen when spoken to
- Has difficulty remembering things and following instructions
- Has trouble staying organized, planning ahead and finishing projects
- Gets bored with a task before it's completed

- Frequently loses or misplaces homework, books, toys etc

Symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity:

- Constantly fidgets and squirms
- Often leaves his or her seat in situations where sitting quietly is expected
- Moves around constantly, often runs or climbs inappropriately
- Talks excessively
- Has difficulty playing quietly or relaxing
- Is always “on the go,” as if driven by a motor
- May have a quick temper or a “short fuse”

Supporting Your child at Home and at School:

- Check that your child is sat away from windows and away from the door in their classroom.
- Give instructions one at a time and repeat as necessary.
- If possible, work on the most difficult tasks early in the day.
- Use visuals i.e; charts, pictures.
- Have a quiet area free of distractions for homework.
- Give frequent breaks if you have asked them to do something.
- Make written lists for more than one task at home.
- Create a structure so your child knows what order they are doing things e.g. homework, tea, bath, reading, bedtime. If the schedule changes let them know in advance.
- Give your child something to 'fiddle with' when they are meant to be listening or concentrating e.g. a squishy/stress ball or some blu-tac.
- Watch for warning signs. If your child looks like s/he is becoming frustrated, over tired and about to lose self-control, try to intervene by distracting him/her calmly.
- Be consistent and firm when setting rules.