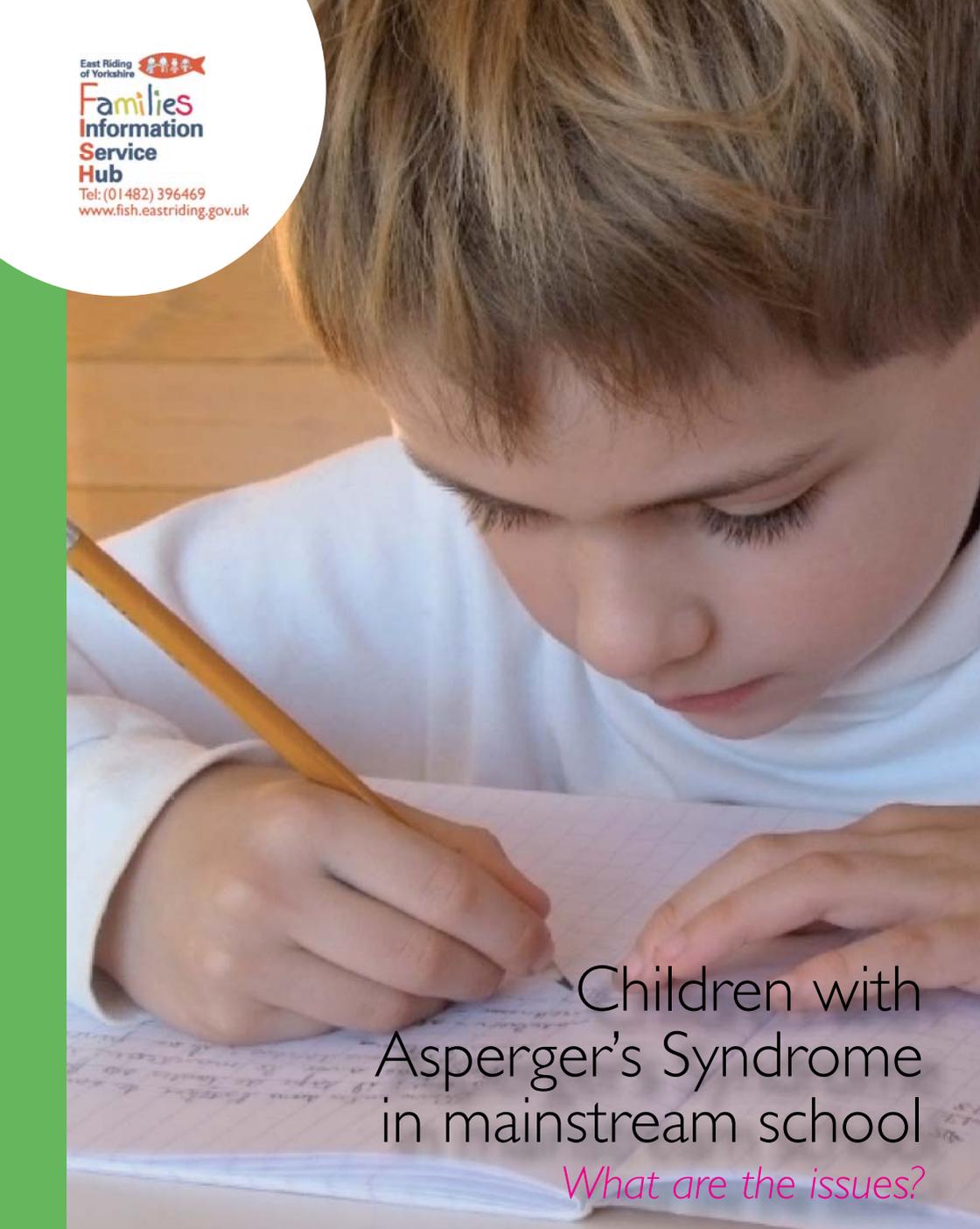


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Children with  
Asperger's Syndrome  
in mainstream school

*What are the issues?*



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# Introduction

## **About the authors:**

**Rosie O'Neill** is a specialist teacher for autism with a post graduate diploma in autism studies. She worked for many years with the East Riding special educational needs service, where she worked closely with parents and children as well as delivering a wide variety of training on the autism spectrum. She now offers consultancy work in primary and secondary schools.

**Kathy Smith** spent many years working as a special educational needs co-ordinator in a secondary school, where she has developed good practice in parental consultation. She is currently completing an MA in autism studies and has recently taken up a new post as head of the autism education service in North Lincolnshire.

**Rosie and Kathy compiled this booklet in partnership with the Beverley Autism Group.**

The group was set up in 2007 to provide an opportunity for parents of school/college age children to share experiences and strategies as well as benefiting from the expertise of invited guest speakers.

Meetings take place each half term at Beverley Grammar School.



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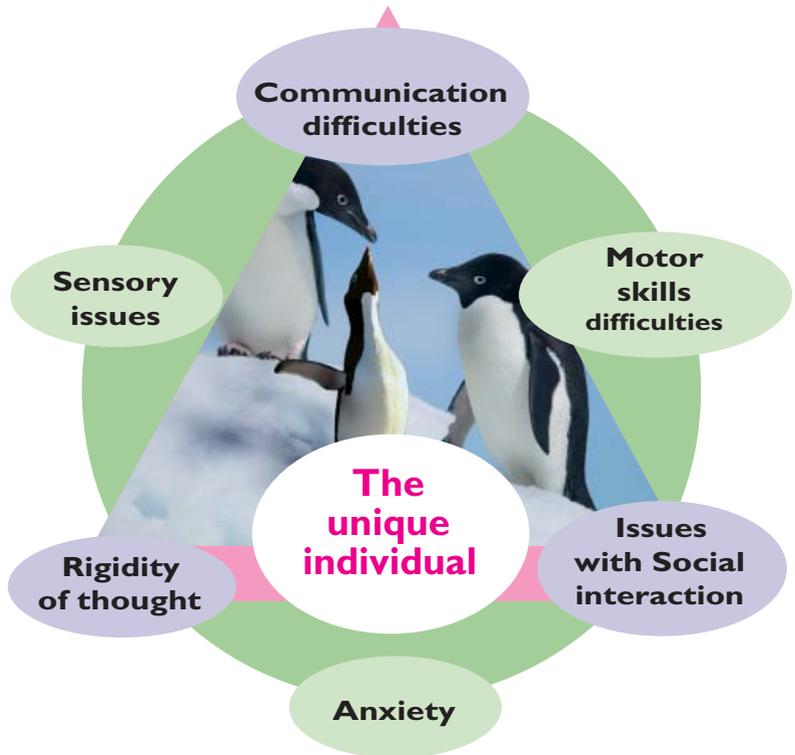
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# What is Asperger's Syndrome?

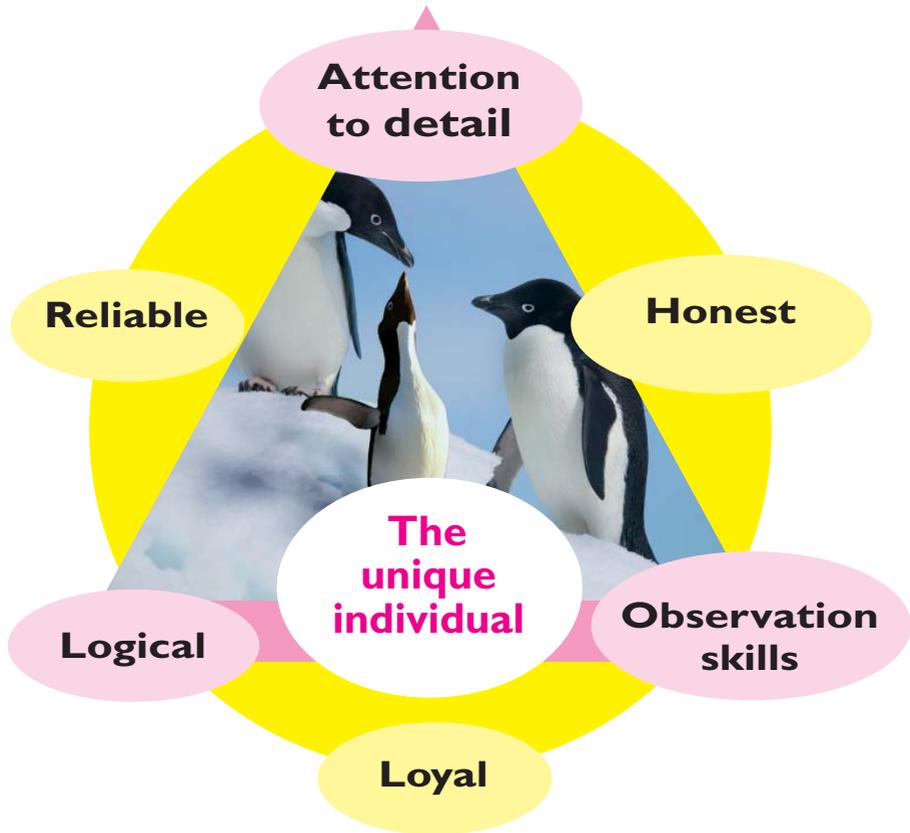
Asperger's Syndrome is part of the autism spectrum.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome are usually of average to above average intelligence, but all have the underlying difficulties of autism.



*'Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. People with autism have difficulties with everyday social interaction.  
National Autism Society (NAS)'*

# An alternative way of looking at Asperger's Syndrome



**Attention to detail**

**Reliable**

**Honest**

**The unique individual**

**Observation skills**

**Logical**

**Loyal**

*'The person usually has a strong desire to seek knowledge, truth and perfection with a different set of priorities than would be expected with other people. There is also a different perception of situations and sensory experiences. The overriding priority may be to solve a problem rather than satisfy the social or emotional needs of others.'*

Tony Attwood, associate Professor  
Griffith University, Queensland  
[www.tonyattwood.com.au](http://www.tonyattwood.com.au)

# A positive approach to life

## **A person with Asperger's Syndrome may:**

- Perceive errors not apparent to others, giving considerable attention to detail, rather than noticing the 'bigger picture'
- Be direct, speaking their mind and being honest and determined and having a strong sense of social justice
- Actively seek and enjoy solitude, be a loyal friend and have a distinct sense of humour

## **In school, pupils with Asperger's Syndrome may:**

- Focus intensely on a topic
- Think logically and often be good at maths, science and ICT
- Enjoy work involving patterns and routines
- Be reliable
- Be fiercely loyal
- Have excellent rote memory
- Develop excellent observation skills
- Have the determination to see a job through
- Think divergently
- Tell the truth and promote justice.



# A different, not defective way of thinking

## **Problems which may arise from the expectations in school.**

Any sort of transition or change in school, whether it be the major transition of moving school or the smaller day to day alterations in routine, are likely to cause greater distress for a child with Asperger's Syndrome.

### **Issues around procedures:**

- At primary school, there is only one classroom, a limited number of adults and set routines. At secondary school students have to adjust to many rooms and different teachers with different routines
- There are many rules but they are not always applied uniformly
- Literal understanding of instructions and rules may lead to confusion.

### **Difficulties with environment:**

- Children on the autism spectrum find it incredibly difficult to cope with the sensory differences (e.g. smell, light levels, background noises) in different rooms.
- The level of unstructured time at breaks and lunchtimes and while changing classes in secondary school is problematic for the

pupil who does not understand the rules of social interaction.

### **Difficulties in social situations:**

- Understanding the unspoken rules of peer interaction is problematic
- Lack of understanding of emotions means they will not understand when someone is angry, joking etc. leading to the appearance of rudeness or foolishness.

### **As a result, pupils on the autism spectrum may be anxious leading them to:**

- Panic and become very volatile
- Create own structures and routines to induce a feeling of safety but which are at odds with school expectations
- Fear any sort of change
- Fail to see someone else's point of view
- Have difficulty making and keeping friends
- Immerse themselves in a narrow range of interests.

It is difficult sometimes to untangle the real reason they are upset.

They tend to be vulnerable to teasing and bullying from peers because of idiosyncratic behaviours and responses.

# Difficulties managing sensory responses

**All people who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum have some difficulties processing sensory stimuli.**

They can have a problem with being hyper (over) or hypo (under) sensitive to all of the five senses we normally know. In addition it is accepted that people on the autism spectrum also have difficulties with vestibular and proprioceptive systems which affect balance and awareness of body position.

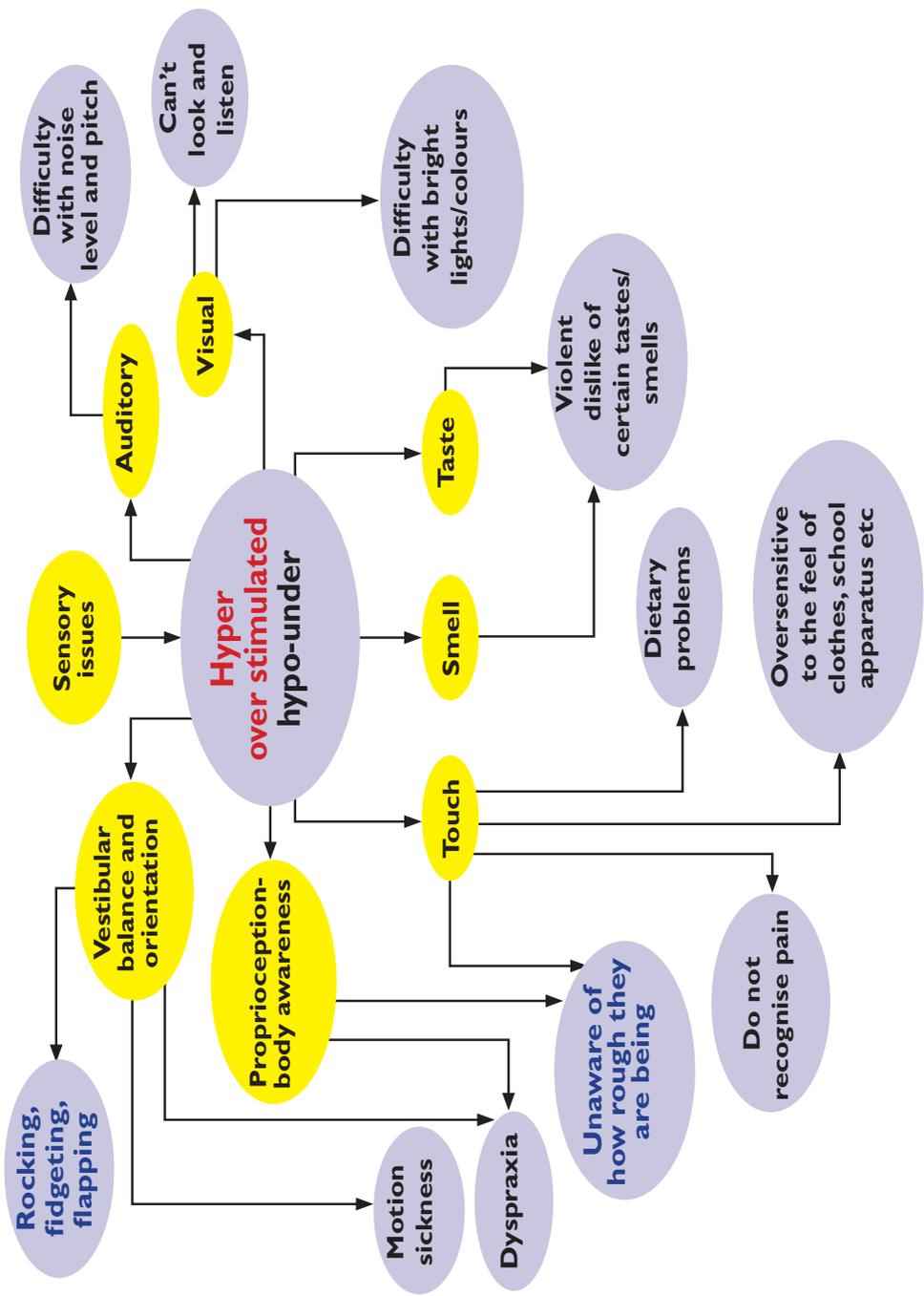
To help the child maximise his/her access to the curriculum sensory overload needs to be minimised.

These children have complex and very individual responses to sensory stimuli as illustrated opposite.

- Visual – flickering lights, bright lights
- Auditory – background noises; computer hum, noisy classes

- Smell – strong dislike of a smell/perfume
- Taste – fussy eater/poor diet
- Tactile – irritated by some fabrics, collars, touching clay, velvet etc
- Balance and body awareness – may press too hard/little when writing, clumsy, motion sickness, flapping, twirling and walking very close to the building, lack of awareness or oversensitivity to pain
- May have difficulty in moderating their voice; either too loud or too quiet
- Are likely to take longer to process information in the classroom as a result of auditory or visual processing difficulties.





# Difficulty with social communication

**This includes using and understanding verbal and non-verbal language, such as gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice.**

Many people on the autism spectrum have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say.

They can find it difficult to use or understand:

- Facial expressions or tone of voice
- Jokes and sarcasm
- Common phrases, sayings and metaphors; an example might be the phrase 'It's cool', which people often say when they think that something is good, but strictly speaking, means that it's a bit cold



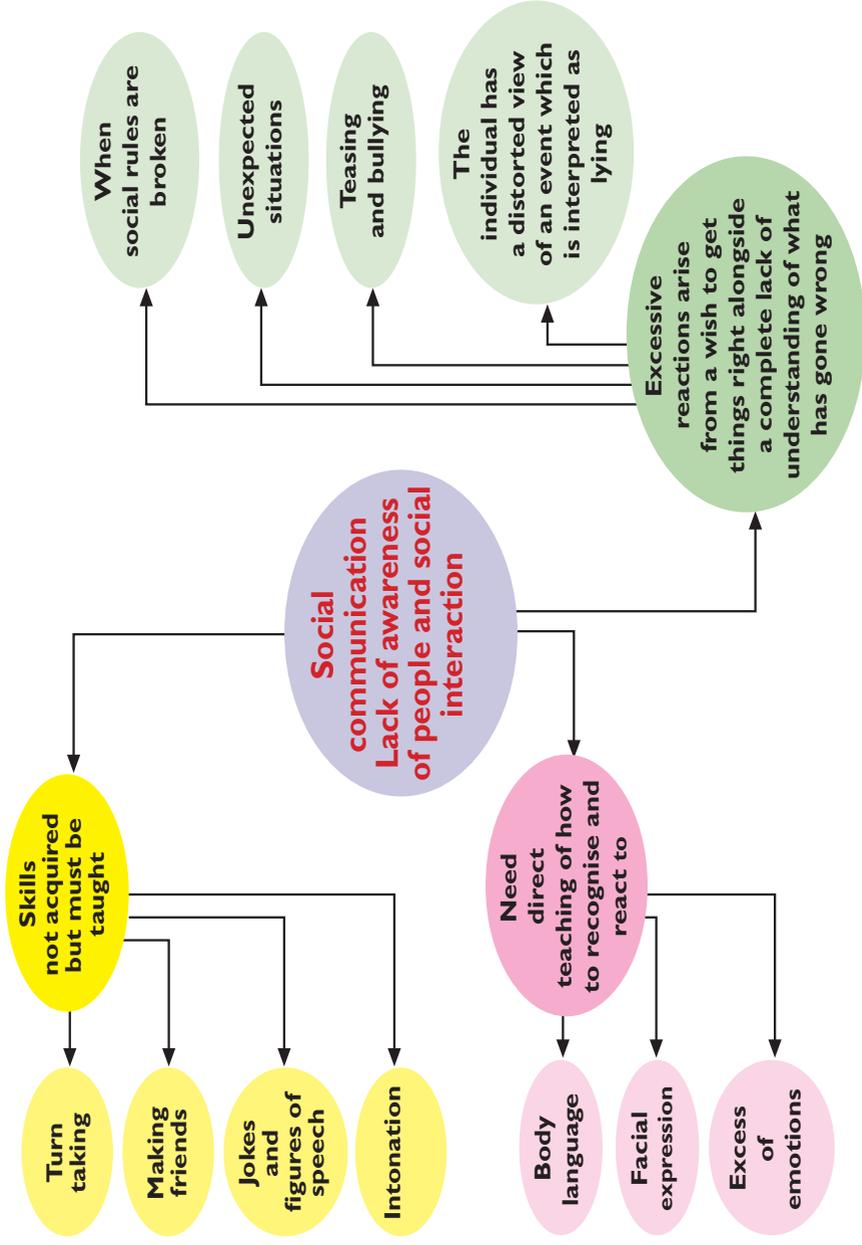
## **Verbally:**

- Instructions need to be unambiguous.

- Specialised vocabulary needs to be reinforced
- Homework needs to be written clearly so it will be understandable at home. A homework buddy is useful
- Staff should be aware that linguistic misunderstandings can lead to teasing
- Idiom ('sayings') and metaphor will need to be explained. Don't assume they will understand
- The pupil may need to be taught when to stop talking and take turns
- The pupil may need to be taught how to accept the other person's point of view
- They may need to moderate their tone of voice.

## **Non-verbally:**

- They will not always understand from your facial expression when you are cross/pleased with them
- Facial expression may not reflect the pupil's actual mood (e.g laughing when embarrassed, angry expression when actually in pain)
- Body language is not always a reflection of how they feel and they do not 'read' other people's body language.



# Difficulty with social understanding

**This includes recognising and understanding other people's feelings and managing their own. People on the autism spectrum may:**

- Not understand the unwritten social rules which most of us pick up without thinking; they may stand too close to another person for example, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation
- Appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- Prefer to spend time alone rather than seeking out the company of other people
- Not seek comfort from other people when distressed
- Will pursue their own interests regardless of what is going on around them
- Appear to behave 'strangely' or inappropriately, as it is not always easy to express feelings, emotions or needs.

**In practical terms at school:**

- They will have difficulties making and keeping friends
- They will often not understand why a friend has fallen out with them
- Having a two way conversation is difficult. They will need to be taught turn taking
- Need to be taught how to negotiate during group work
- They will need to be taught to think through the small sequential steps
- Need to be taught the skills of adolescence including dating rules.

**All teachers need to be aware of the subtleties of coping with Asperger's Syndrome in school and employ a whole school approach to removing barriers to inclusion.**



# Rigidity of thought and difficulty with social imagination

**This includes the ability to understand and predict other people's intentions and behaviour and to imagine situations outside their own routine. This can be accompanied by a narrow repetitive range of activities. People on the autism spectrum find it hard to:**

- Understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions
- Predict what will happen next, or what could happen next
- Understand the concept of danger; for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- Engage in imaginative play and activities: children with autism may enjoy some imaginative play but prefer to act out the same scenes each time
- Prepare for change and plan for the future.
- Cope in new or unfamiliar situations
- Grasp the importance of good hygiene, the impact of fashion etc in terms of social acceptability

**In practical terms at school the pupil may:**

- Need support on school visits from someone who knows them well, in addition to extra risk assessments and planning
- Be unable to put themselves in anyone else's position and therefore they will find it very difficult to write essays involving empathy
- Struggle to understand a social situation novel e.g. Jane Austen, finding it difficult to discuss emotions and personality that a character portrays
- Need to be taught adolescent survival skills such as good hygiene and grooming or discouraged from excessive cleanliness routines
- Need to be helped to develop a balance between special interest and school work.



# Anxiety

## **Trying to fit into the alien social environment of school can result in greatly heightened anxiety.**

We all behave differently when we are anxious. When we are anxious everyday sensory stimuli may become unbearable.

For instance the buzzing strip light in the doctor's surgery when you are waiting for difficult news.

Similarly the driver tootling along at 30 mph in a 60 mile limit is an irritation most days, but if you are driving your partner to the maternity hospital it produces very different feelings.

How much worse is it for those on the autism spectrum when they are coping with sensory sensitivities?

Trying to understand the world may differ hugely from their peers and teachers, and they may have a desperate need to maintain a routine in order to be in control.

One response to anxiety is to explode with anger. Another is to withdraw and become very quiet and unresponsive.

Parents see the extreme anxiety their child is suffering but schools sometimes interpret this as bad behaviour or, if the child is withdrawn, do not notice it at all.

Some children literally 'hit their

head against a brick wall' or something similar.

## **In practical terms at school**

The better the teacher knows the child the more likely they are to be able to identify the causes and signs of anxiety and stress.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome will need a quiet calm place to retreat, especially at unstructured times.

The school library is often a haven as it is quiet and structured.

An opportunity to pursue their special interest can be used as an effective calming mechanism.

A safe place to go when too stressed to stay in the classroom and an understanding that they may leave without warning if things get too much.

Buddies that understand and can explain to an adult what is happening when things get too much for their friend who has Asperger's Syndrome.

A passport or short pen picture which can be carried around to show to unfamiliar adults to explain their needs and responses.

# The parent's role

**Parents have a crucial role to play in supporting inclusion in school and are almost always keen to be involved.**

- Schools need to listen carefully to what parents have to say. They are all too aware of their own child's difficulties and strengths
- Some children manage to behave well for six hours at school but will be really difficult at home. Teachers need to empathise with this
- Parents can help the school to understand any sensory difficulties. Sometimes by talking the parents become aware of their child's sensory problems. They have always made allowances at home, not realising why
- Teachers need to be aware that some of these children do become very tired. They have two areas to learn –

social understanding as well as academia.

- Homework can be a problem. School is for working, home for relaxing and some children find it difficult to cope with the mixing
- They could be encouraged to use the homework club or arrive early to do work at school, or use a timer and follow with a reward activity.

Many parents become nervous when called into school. Some have had very negative feedback, especially before the diagnosis.

They need a supportive ethos from the school.

- Quick access to a named person as issues arise can prevent or alleviate many problems
- Parents and school together can help each other to see the positives!

## **Questions for teachers and assistants to ask themselves:**

- Why are they behaving like this?
- Is there something simple that could be changed to make a difference?
- Is it naughtiness or anxiety?
- Can the activities I plan be fitted to the child's best learning style?
- Is my classroom a safe, predictable and ordered space?
- Can I use a special interest as a teaching tool or to raise self esteem?
- Do I explain more than once if necessary, and then wait for the information to be processed?



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