

Autism and the ways you can help

Classic autism ... autism ... Asperger syndrome ... atypical autism ... high-functioning autism ... pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) ... pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) ... semantic pragmatic disorder ... autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

What do these words and phrases mean?

These words and phrases are all often used to describe forms of autism or conditions related to autism. Autism is a lifelong disability. All people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, sometimes called the ‘triad of impairments’. These are:

- difficulty understanding and using language to communicate
- difficulty with social interaction and relationships with people
- difficulty with ‘social imagination’.

While all people with autism share these three difficulties, their disability will affect them in very different ways. Some are able to live relatively ‘everyday’ lives; others will need a lifetime of specialist support.

Here, we give examples of some of the difficulties people with autism may face, and ways in which you can help. We sometimes refer to people with autism as ‘he’, but the information given applies to all people with autism.

Difficulty understanding and using language to communicate

People with autism may:

- have difficulty understanding and using gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- find it difficult to respond to questions and instructions
- repeat what has been said. This is called ‘echolalia’
- have difficulty in starting and maintaining a conversation
- take phrases literally, which can make it difficult to understand proverbs, jokes and common sayings. For example, a person with autism may think that the common English phrase ‘It’s cool’ means that it is cold, when people actually use it to say that something is good or fashionable
- use complex words, but not understand their meaning
- talk about a special interest they have, not noticing that others do not share this interest
- some people with autism may not develop speech.

The ways you can help:

- get the attention of the person before starting a conversation (for example, tap on their shoulder or say their name)
- use language at a level that the person can understand
- speak clearly and keep your sentences short
- don't use indirect language with hidden meanings. A person with autism may answer 'yes' to the question 'Have you got a watch?' or 'Do you know what the time is?' when you really meant, 'What is the time?'
- use pictures to help understanding
- allow time for the person to respond to what you have said
- think about other ways of communicating, such as writing, signing or using pictures if necessary.

Difficulty with social interaction and relationships with people

People with autism may:

- find it difficult to understand other people's emotions and feelings
- find it difficult to express their emotions and feelings in a socially acceptable manner
- want to interact with other people, but not know how to do it
- find it difficult to build relationships and friendships with others
- not understand the 'social rules', or accepted ways of behaving, for different settings such as home, school or work
- not want to share activities with others
- not like meeting other people
- find it difficult to recognise other people's emotions, likes and interests
- not seek comfort from others.

The ways you can help:

- accept that the person may need some time alone
- try to make your feelings clear. If you feel happy, look and say that you are happy
- explain the rules for a social situation and refer to them if needed
- encourage the person to interact with others, for example, if they like computers, could they join a computer club?
- over time, help the person to develop social interaction skills, perhaps by practising situations at home or in school. A social worker, teacher or other professional may be able to help
- help the person to understand and explain their feelings. For example, give your child his favourite toy and say, 'This makes you happy.'

Difficulty with 'social imagination'

People with autism may:

- enjoy structure and routine

- want to follow the same routine every day
- find change difficult
- find it difficult to understand 'abstract' subjects, such as stories or religious education
- find it difficult to guess what other people are thinking
- have focused interests in specific areas, such as train timetables or collecting chocolate wrappers
- try to impose routines on others
- have difficulty in imaginative play and activities. For example, if you ask a child with autism to draw a house, he may answer, 'Which house?'

The ways you can help:

- structure the person's day, perhaps by using real objects, photographs, pictures or a written timetable
- provide time when they can do their favourite activities
- prepare the person for change by telling them about it in advance
- use visual means, such as a timetable, to introduce changes
- make gradual changes
- encourage the person to broaden their interests. For example, if your child collects chocolate wrappers, see if you can interest him in locating the countries where they are produced. This may lead to him learning more about the people and customs of different countries
- help in developing these interests into hobbies, if possible. For example, if your child likes tearing paper, you could try teaching him origami
- provide opportunities to develop new or different interests. For example, if your teenage child likes water, encourage him to learn swimming
- help in developing imaginative thinking. For example, hold up a piece of paper on which you have been writing and ask 'What else can you do with this piece of paper?' Possible responses may be fold it, cut it into shapes or wrap something with it.

Behaviour

Because of the difficulties they experience, some people with autism may appear to behave inappropriately. This may happen because:

- they are trying to communicate
- they do not understand the social rules
- they are feeling anxious, scared or frustrated
- they enjoy a particular activity but do not understand its consequences. For example, one person with autism loved the sound of breaking glass but did not realise it was not safe or acceptable to break glass in public.

Sometimes you may not know why the person with autism is behaving in a particular way. A psychologist, doctor or a specialist teacher may be able to help you.

The ways you can help:

- work with the person to encourage better means of communication
- channel the behaviour into socially acceptable forms. For example, if the person likes clapping their hands loudly, encourage them to play an instrument like drums
- if the person is anxious or upset, find a quiet place where they can calm down
- if you know there is an object that will help the person to calm down, such as a favourite toy for a child, keep this to hand
- provide alternatives where possible. For example, if the person does not like loud noises, give them earphones to wear when they are out and about
- seek a doctor's advice if you think that there may be a medical problem
- slowly expose them to some of the situations that they are finding difficult
- provide time for them to do their favourite activity in a safe environment.

Learning disabilities

Some people with autism may have learning disabilities, which can affect all aspects of someone's life, from studying in school, to learning how to wash themselves or make a meal. Some will be able to live fairly independently, while others may need lifelong, specialist support. However, all people with autism can learn and develop with the right sort of support.

People with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome usually do not have learning disabilities but still have problems in the three areas discussed in this leaflet.

Sometimes, people with autism have other conditions. These may include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia or dyspraxia.

Sensory sensitivity

People with autism may have some form of sensory sensitivity. This can occur in one or more of the five senses – sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. A person's senses are either intensified or under-sensitive.

For example, a person with autism may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain.

People who are under-sensitive may not feel pain or extremes of temperature. Some may rock, spin or flap their hands to create sensation, to help with balance and posture or to deal with stress.

People with sensory sensitivity may also find it harder to use their body awareness system. This system tells us where our bodies are, so for those with reduced body awareness, it can be harder to navigate rooms avoiding obstructions, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out 'fine motor' tasks such as tying shoelaces.

Strengths

- Most people with autism are good at learning visually. Using real objects, pictures, demonstrations and written material can all help.
- Some people with autism have a good eye for detail and accuracy.
- Once learned, information, routine or processes are likely to be retained. For example, some may be good at music, numbers, facts or computers.
- Some can focus on their special interest for a long time and may choose to study or work in related areas.
- The love of routine can make individuals with autism reliable employees in an organised, structured environment.

What causes autism?

No one knows why people have autism. However, it may be caused by brain development before, during or soon after birth. It can be genetic – something which is passed from parents to children.

If your child has autism, it is not because you are a bad parent. Autism is not caused by a person's upbringing, their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition.

At present, there is no cure for autism.

Who is affected by autism?

Autism is much more common than most people think. There are over half a million people in the UK with autism – that's around 1 in 100 people.

People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can have autism, although it appears to affect more men than women. It is a lifelong condition: children with autism grow up to become adults with autism.

Terms you may hear

Autistic spectrum condition (ASC) or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) – a general name or umbrella term for all the variations of the disability.

Asperger syndrome – a form of autism where people share the three main areas of difficulty but do not have learning difficulties or delayed speech development.

Atypical autism – people with atypical autism do not share all three main areas of difficulty. Atypical autism may not be noticed before three years of age.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) – people with this condition have difficulty in paying attention to a task or conversation. They may not be able to finish what they have started, and also find it difficult stay in one place for a long time.

Classic autism/Kanner syndrome – another name for autism.

Diagnosis – the identification of autism, usually by a health professional.

Dyslexia – this condition causes difficulty with learning to read, write and spell.

Dyspraxia – this condition causes difficulty with organisation skills. Like dyslexia, people with dyspraxia can also have difficulty with reading, writing and mathematics.

Echolalia – repeating words which have just been spoken by other people.

High-functioning autism – the same as Asperger syndrome, but with delayed speech development.

Pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) – an umbrella term referring to ASD and some other conditions, for example, Fragile X syndrome. PDD is an American term.

Pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) – another name for atypical autism. PDD-NOS is an American term.

Semantic pragmatic disorder – difficulties with social interaction and language but not with imaginative thinking. This is not a common term in the UK.

Social interaction – communicating with and responding to other people in a wide range of social settings.

Social imagination – having rigid patterns of thought, difficulty understanding different viewpoints, new ideas and broad concepts.

Social rules – accepted ways of behaving in different settings, such as at school, at home and at work.

Spectrum – people with autism are affected by their disability to different degrees, so autism is known as a ‘spectrum condition’.

Triad of impairments – the three main difficulties that people with autism have.

Visual supports – pictures, photographs or written materials that help understanding.

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information about autism, contact our Autism Helpline or visit our website: www.autism.org.uk

Autism Helpline
Open Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm
Tel: 0845 070 4004
Minicom: 0845 070 4003
Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

The Autism Helpline has a telephone interpretation service for callers from the UK. This allows us to provide information through an interpreter in 150 languages.

Someone has to speak in English at first to let us know your name, number, and the language you speak. We will then call you back with an interpreter.