



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

*Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga*

ASD

# Autism Spectrum Disorder

## A Resource for Teachers

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**ASD**

# **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

**A Resource for Teachers**

## Introduction

*Life is like a video,  
I watch but cannot partake.  
My uneven skills are but an echo,  
Of the frustrations which I hate!*

*School was a nightmare! I was so easily caught  
away with life's interruptions. It might have been  
a child coughing, a bus passing by on the road outside,  
a bird singing, or simply my own thinking trying  
to work out words from a previous conversation.  
I couldn't organise either myself, or my time.  
I knew that I didn't 'fit' anywhere.* Wendy Lawson

This resource is designed to give teachers an insight into some of the challenges faced by school students with autism spectrum disorder, some of the characteristics of the disorder, and practical strategies for support. Please note that it is not a substitute for the many excellent and detailed books on the topic, and it is most emphatically not a substitute for skilled, experienced and specialised help.

The umbrella term “autism spectrum disorder” is used to acknowledge that there is a range of disorders that share characteristics, including autism and Asperger syndrome. The focus of this resource is on students in the middle rather than at the extreme ends of the spectrum.

Autism spectrum disorder is a pervasive developmental disorder. It can affect one person completely differently from another and is life-long. Skill development can be very uneven. For example, a person with the disorder may be extremely gifted in some academic areas and yet show very poor ability in others. Another may have poor social and self-management skills.

Every student with autism spectrum disorder will have a unique range of abilities and needs.

## Characteristics of autism spectrum disorder

Each person on the autism spectrum will show particular characteristics to varying degrees and in unique combinations. All people with autism spectrum disorder have what is referred to as the “triad of impairments”:

- **Social interaction** – difficulty with making friends eg, they may appear distant to other people.
- **Social communication** – difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication eg, not really understanding the meaning of gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice; not knowing when it is appropriate to start and stop talking.
- **Imagination** – difficulty in developing flexible creative thinking. This often leads to repetitive thoughts and actions and difficulties with symbolic play.

Although it is relatively easy to describe the characteristics of autism spectrum disorder, diagnosis is a complex process because it is only in particular combinations of several of these characteristics that the diagnosis is made. However, the earlier the diagnosis, the better the chances are of that person receiving appropriate help and support.

Autism spectrum disorder is pervasive. This means it affects the individual at school, at home, in play, fun and relaxation, on the sports field, within their family and whānau, in the community and while pursuing their special interests. Those who spend the most time with the student (especially their families) will understand their abilities and difficulties, obsessions and phobias. They are likely to have developed many coping strategies that, when shared, will help everyone to tune into the student’s unique needs.

## How teachers can make a difference

*Good teaching can make a difference, and high expectations (as long as they accept the child's difficulties) are as important ... in autism as for any other group.* Powell & Jordan, 1997

Finding practical and effective approaches to enable a student to achieve their goals depends on identifying particular strengths and weaknesses, interests and aversions. Students with autism spectrum disorder are actively seeking to make sense of a confusing world. Their problem-solving strategies may appear unusual to other people but not to them – they are simply working through a process.

*These children need help to interpret the world. Just as you would not expect someone who was blind to see, you cannot expect someone with autism to have social vision.* Parent

For most students, school is a rich social environment, which can be surprising, stimulating, exciting and challenging. It provides opportunities for experimenting, engaging and learning.

For almost all students with autism spectrum disorder however, school is a confusing, demanding and noisy place. It challenges their need for order and predictability. They can try very hard every day to work out the rules and do the same things as other students, but their disability means that they can still get it wrong, get laughed at and feel little sense of belonging or achievement. A normal day at school can leave them feeling anxious, overloaded, distressed and with low self-esteem.

Practical strategies can make a significant difference to the student, through supporting their social and communication skills and adapting and interpreting the school environment to their needs.

*The quality of life of someone with autism depends more on the way we can adapt to their differences – rather than modify their efforts.* Peeters & Gillberg, 1999

It is important to note that these strategies will not only help students with autism spectrum disorder in the classroom but all students with social and communication needs.

## Support team

People with autism spectrum disorder are highly individual and need equally individual packages of support. The first step towards providing support is for those working closely with the student to assemble an individual profile, including unique skills and needs (see page 20). The family and whānau, school support staff and specialised team can then use this profile as the basis for individual education programmes.

The specialised team may include a specialist teacher or a resource teacher: learning and behaviour (RTL B), or a special education provider such as the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE). No one person will have all the skills and expertise required. Together the team will provide the complementary skills required to meet the student's needs.

## Adapting classroom and teaching practices

It is only by understanding the particular challenges faced by students at school that teachers are able to make changes and use strategies that reduce stress and increase success.

Each student with autism spectrum disorder is so unique that it is hard to make any generalisations. There is no “one size fits all” approach. However the following are examples of some strategies which have been found to be successful in overcoming the specific difficulties explained in the “triad of impairments”. When used in conjunction with an understanding of the individual student, teachers should find these strategies make a significant contribution towards improving the learning environment and outcomes.

### Sensory challenges

*Sometimes the channels get confused as when the sounds come through as colour, sometimes I know something is coming in somewhere but I can't tell right away what sense it is coming through.*

Cesaroni & Garber, 1991

Many students with autism spectrum disorder have a different sensory experience of the world. This may involve any of the senses, and the pattern of sensitivities can change across settings and over time.

Students may be over reactive (hypersensitive) to things sensory or under reactive (hyposensitive). They may only be able to use or focus on one sensory channel at a time and/or have difficulty identifying which sense is receiving a message. They may have one or more preferred senses that they rely on to give them information on the world.

Autobiographies from people with autism spectrum disorder have given us a unique insight into these difficulties.

*I have caught myself turning off the car radio while trying to read a road sign or turning off the kitchen appliances so that I could taste something.*

Cesaroni & Garber, 1991

For some students, ordinary sounds and smells, things they see or taste, or being touched will be extremely aversive – and even physically or emotionally painful.

*Scratchy petticoats were like sandpaper scraping away at raw nerve endings.* Grandin, 1995

### Strategies

- “Stand in the student’s shoes” and use the individual profile (see page 20) to identify the sensory challenges that they may be facing, then work with them to minimise the impact.
- Use the information from parents and from careful observations to review whether there is anything at school or in the classroom, such as particular resources, sounds or textures, which might be creating aversive experiences.
- Find a place in the classroom that accommodates any sensory sensitivities eg, away from the window and harsh lighting if the student is sensitive to light, or away from computer fans if the student is sensitive to noise.

## Social challenges

*It was years before I realized that other people are guided by their emotions during most social interactions. For me the proper behaviour during social interactions had to be learned by intellect. I became more skilled at social interaction as I became more experienced. Throughout my life I have been helped by understanding teachers and mentors.* Grandin, 1995

Many people with autism spectrum disorder can only see the world from their own point of view. Consequently they have difficulty in developing empathy or responding appropriately to the emotional state of others around them. They use the same process for storing social messages as they do factual messages and are therefore unable to generalise what they learn and apply this knowledge to other situations.

*I have great difficulty with new social situations if I cannot recall a similar situation to use as a guide. After many years I have learned by rote how to act in a number of different situations.* Grandin, 1999

## Strategies

- It is important to build a relationship with the student, particularly through learning about and sharing the student's interests.
- Establish regular communication with parents and caregivers. A daily notebook is recommended, particularly when the student is not able to convey messages between home and school. Knowing what is happening in both settings leads to opportunities to communicate with and teach the student.
- Explain and teach social messages eg, a range of greetings, which might be appropriate with peers, a teacher, the principal, someone in a shop, at a sports club.
- Explain the rules of social conduct in a step-by-step manner by explicit teaching of social skills eg, facial expressions, gestures, personal space, taking turns in conversation and appropriate personal remarks.

- Ensure the student has the opportunity to balance structured opportunities for socialising and the need for quiet times to avoid “overload”.
- Interest in socialising may be better nurtured by starting with just one other person and building on a shared interest, such as trains or marbles. Sometimes the student may choose to “buddy” with a much older or younger student because they may not provide as many social challenges as someone their own age.
- Encourage and educate peers to assist the student, either informally or in a more structured setting. This needs to be managed carefully, in partnership with families and whānau.

## Communication challenges

*It was ages before I realized that people speaking might be demanding my attention.*

Joliffe, Lansdown & Robinson, 1992

Communication is often the major challenge for students with autism spectrum disorder and those around them. Often it appears the student’s only interest in communication is to ensure their needs are met. Acquisition of language skills often follows an unusual sequence and the level of language achieved can vary significantly between students. Some students have limited language. Others may have very sophisticated vocabulary on topics which interest them but are unable to apply it in other contexts.

Some students can speak well but most of their language may actually be repeating by rote something they have heard from videos, books or other sources. All students with autism spectrum disorder will have problems using language for social interaction. They process language (particularly oral language) slowly and with difficulty and while they are listening, the words can also trigger a lot of irrelevant information. They tend to have difficulties filtering out the unimportant detail which means that by the time they are finally tuned to the same “channel” as the speaker, the moment for responding has passed.

Although the extent of these difficulties will vary, all students with autism spectrum disorder find verbal information a challenge and have difficulty in following multiple verbal instructions. Teachers can help compensate for this by keeping directions to a minimum, providing clear instructions, and using visual cues.

### Strategies

- Use the student’s name to get their attention and wait for a response. Make sure you are within their range of vision – some students find it difficult to make and maintain eye contact. Give clear instructions – “Sit down at your desk” not “Where are you supposed to go?”
- A series of cues can help the student on to the same “wavelength” before you ask a question eg, “Yesterday, in English, we talked about the book about Harry Potter. He is a wizard and he has some words he uses to get things. When he wants a light, he says ‘lumos’. Tell me some other things that he says.” Avoid open-ended questions, such as “What did Harry Potter do?” This example would be useful for a student with strong cognitive skills.
- Cloze techniques and closed questions are often more successful eg, say “ $9 \times 9 = ?$ ” rather than asking: “What is 9 times 9?”; ask “What is your next class?” rather than “What should you be doing now?”

- Most students with autism spectrum disorder have superior visual abilities – they say they “think in pictures”. Checklists of regular routines and sequential instructions are often helpful, as are flow charts and mind maps. Visual supports can be referred to over and over again whereas oral language is transient – once it is said, it is no longer available.
- Take care with non-verbal communication. The student with autism spectrum disorder will not recognise the subtle intonations, body language and facial expressions that lend meaning. Similarly they are unlikely to understand the use of irony, sarcasm, idiom or some forms of humour. Explain what idioms mean eg, “pull your socks up”.
- Consider offering the student the use of an electronic notetaker or computer for written language tasks to address difficulties with multi-tasking and motor coordination problems. Such technology also meets the needs of many students for the words to look perfect.
- Some students will be using non-verbal communication systems, such as sign language, picture or symbol communication systems, or other facilitated approaches. Whatever system has been agreed, the key to success is consistent implementation across all settings.

## Teaching adaptations

*The aim must be not to fit pupils into the curriculum but to see what aspects ... can be used to meet their needs.*

Powell & Jordan, 1997

Students with autism spectrum disorder often have one or a few areas of particular interest eg, trains, Disney animations or electronics. These special interests are usually highly motivating for the student and when incorporated into the academic program, provide many opportunities for learning. Special interests can also be used as a reward or motivator.

Thinking tasks that require reasoning, judgement and insight can be difficult for students with autism spectrum disorder. While a student may be very capable in a particular subject area, tasks that require them to draw inferences or use perspective may pose challenges. Prediction tasks can provoke anxiety because generally students cannot bear to be wrong.

## Strategies

- When making teaching adaptations, decide on and retain the main objective of the lesson but be flexible in how the student receives instructions or demonstrates their knowledge.
- The student may find it difficult to multi-task, therefore find ways to separate tasks, such as thinking and planning from writing or presenting.
- Use the student's interest to teach curriculum content eg, for a student with an interest in trains, there is the potential for "train-themed maths" across the mathematics curriculum. When the student has mastered the concepts, widen the activity to enable the student to generalise the concepts.
- Use the student's topics of interest as a reward or motivator. Give them relevant projects involving their special interest, which they can do when they have completed some other more demanding activity.

- Modify activities that require students to take on others' perspectives by making them more concrete. Use role-play and re-enactment with explicit teaching about each person's perspective to build understanding.
- Design programmes that maximise students' strengths to ensure plenty of successful experiences. Be aware of the possible need for periods of scheduled relaxation or reduced participation for the student.

### Predictability and transitions

*Reality to an autistic person is a confusing mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seem to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent in trying to work out the pattern behind everything. Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life.* Joliffe, Lansdown & Robinson, 1992

A predictable daily environment will result in significant reduction in anxiety and corresponding improvements in behaviour. However, there will be inevitable changes of plan and times of transition from one schedule or setting to another. It is crucial to find ways to prepare students for these changes.

Students become very “tuned in” to particular thoughts, ideas and routines and it is difficult for them to shift attention from one activity or setting to the next. Transition between activities, locations and classrooms, between home and school, and between school and other environments needs to be carefully planned and managed to achieve success.

Students with autism spectrum disorder also usually like logical rules. They may be able to recite all of the class or school rules and become the class “police” by reporting infringements. However, because they lack an understanding of the “why” of the rules, they are often unable to generalise the required behaviour appropriately or identify situations when the rules don’t apply.

### Strategies

- Add clocks to timetables and give the student warning when it is almost time for a change eg, “look at the clock, in 10 minutes, it will be time for ...” (adjust the amount of warning given to the student’s needs). It is a good idea to include any changes from the routine for tomorrow as well as for today. Provide a visual representation of the next activity eg, a relevant book, to help them to shift their attention.
- Try to minimise interruptions once the student is working. If interrupted, they often have difficulty resuming the activity.
- Use of visual strategies such as schedules will help to explain sequences. For example, the class could assemble a book (including photos) or make a video about a new location emphasising the people, what will happen there, and which things will be the same, particularly things in which the student is interested.

- Rehearse the situation or let the student see familiar faces in the new location to help the transition. Visual cues, such as photographs of the new environment and people, are useful as part of the preparation. Make sure the student has opportunities to say “goodbye” to the people and the old location.
- Transition to adult life should include extensive planning and encompass training in areas such as self-care, self-management, social skills, using public transport, functional skills and living in a community. Post-school transition should include ensuring that students have somewhere to live, appropriate advocacy and advice on income support entitlements.

### Avoiding overload

*These kids are heroes, when you think about how hard they must work, just to get through each day.* Parent

Overload is the single biggest problem for students in the school setting. Positive learning outcomes will depend on the student having sufficient personal space, time to process instructions, time to recover and feel success from their efforts, and appropriate rewards.

### Strategies

- Provide an established place where the student can store and sort through their resources; a safe retreat for times when anxiety or overload occurs.
- Ensure classrooms are well structured eg, items are stored in the same place and important parts of the room are labelled. Minimise distracting visual displays, such as objects dangling at eye level in front of the board.
- Give regular planned breaks. These could incorporate “circuit time” – planned physical activity of the student’s choice eg, walking, running within school grounds, with appropriate support. Have a quiet place where students can go to relax – they could work in the library, at the computer, or have special projects relating to their special interests.
- A quieter place in the classroom could be created using a workstation with a light, removable screen. Students may welcome opportunities to work slightly apart from the rest of the class at particularly agitating times.
- Keep directions to a minimum and messages to the point – it is easy to “over-explain” which may cause overload.

## Behaviour challenges

The most difficult behaviours occur when a student is trying to convey that they are not coping with expectations or the situation. It is usually best to deal with behaviour alternatives after the incident has passed.

The key is to explore what purpose or function this behaviour has for the student. It will often be related to an attempt to communicate: perhaps confusion about a social situation, the need for a break or a change of activity. Sometimes it may be an attempt to release tension or calm him or herself.

They are often keen to “get it right” but they don’t know what “it” is unless it is explained to them. Programmes for behaviour change will include targeted teaching of social and communication skills (and assistance to generalise) as well as specific ways of coping with stress. To be effective, these new behaviours often need to be scripted and rehearsed. Students are unlikely to generalise new behaviours until they can understand the “why” as well as the “what”.

Some students may seem defiant, cheeky, rude or non-compliant. They will often actually be repeating something they have seen or heard and do not understand that it is not appropriate. Students develop behaviours as a defence for aversive situations. It is therefore better to deal with difficult situations at the initial stage, before the development of more challenging secondary behaviours.

Behaviours such as repetitive flapping, pacing, spinning, singing or laughing usually indicate a need for some respite or other help.

### Strategies

- Observe carefully to identify the triggers of difficult behaviour.
- Keep calm and try to re-direct, rather than confront the behaviour. Keep a note in the profile (see page 20) of what works. When students become distressed, they usually need a safe and quiet area to calm down.
- There may be safety issues – the student might run, hide or hurt themselves or others. Make a contingency plan with parents, professionals and others for these occasions. Ensure that everyone who may come into contact with the student knows what to do at these times.
- Visual representations may be helpful eg, “feeling faces” (pictures of different emotions) or colours for the student to recognise their own feelings. During a calm time, script, rehearse and practise alternative behaviours. Teach relaxation techniques and use visual strategies to indicate what they can do if they are “going to red”, eg, to take five deep breaths or move to a quiet area.
- Other strategies may include modifying tasks or the environment eg, making the task shorter or adapting the physical environment to give the student a quiet place.

## The “invisible curriculum”

Below are some strategies for non-curricular activities which students often find most difficult:

- Lunchtime can be a jungle without rules or routines. Students need to have a safe place they can go within the playground and inside the school.
- Assembly and other large groups of people can be intimidating. Students are often best seated where they can move away if they need to, with supervision and support.
- Self-management and sequencing is likely to be challenging. Students are often considered lazy but they actually need help – checklists, timetables and visual plans help them work out what to do next.
- Change creates lots of anxiety. Give plenty of warning about major changes in programme eg, relieving teachers.
- Students often find homework difficult because they separate school and home into work and relaxation. Consider setting homework which they can do in natural settings, eg, practical maths objectives, or allow them to do their homework at school.
- Behaviours and skills often go in cycles – students may even lose the ability to do some things they have previously done. However, when the cycle improves, they can often recover their previous skills and show a noticeable jump in performance. Ask parents how long “challenging” cycles usually last and try to modify expectations of the student.
- Students with autism spectrum disorder can become the targets of bullying, largely because they behave differently. It often takes a long time for them to report it, so teachers and parents need to have a plan for students to keep themselves safe, before incidents occur.

## Building a student profile

Working with a student with autism spectrum disorder requires a team approach. It is highly advisable to draw on experiences from parents, families, whānau and other professionals to develop or add to an individual profile. This profile becomes the unique snapshot of the student and is likely to include:

- Likes/dislikes
- Skills
- Communication
- Social interaction
- Unusual behaviour and triggers
- Other information, such as
  - pain or ill health
  - medication
  - sleeping patterns
  - tendency to run away, hide or injure themselves or others
  - toileting
  - who is able to calm him/her, and how
  - family concerns
  - who is/has been involved on their team.

## Particular teaching skills required

Teachers who find the most success with students with autism spectrum disorder will:

- Have well-structured, predictable programmes
- Have a quiet and calm manner
- Be reflective, adaptable, and work in a team
- Be attracted by difference
- Already be teaching social and cooperative skills
- Show understanding and compassion
- Have a sense of humour
- Not take comments or behaviour personally
- Be willing to adapt their style of communication
- Be able to understand levels of social communication
- Have the imagination to understand and share the mind of someone who lacks imagination
- Never be satisfied by how much they know
- Accept that progress sometimes brings challenges
- Be willing to take on a partnership with parents, families and whānau.

## Fact file

No single cause for autism spectrum disorder has yet been discovered, however there is increasing evidence to support a biological basis whereby various parts of the brain develop differently.

There are a number of international prevalence studies but none which have looked specifically at the New Zealand population. In the most recent international studies the prevalence rate of all autism spectrum disorders is 116.1 per 10,000 children, with a prevalence of autism of 38.9 per 10,000 children. (Baird, et al, 2006). Boys with autism spectrum disorders outnumber girls.

Diagnosis is usually completed by medical specialists such as a psychiatrist, paediatrician or psychologist.

If you have concerns about a student, talk to their parents and then contact the Ministry of Education, Special Education for advice and information.

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## Further reading

This list is just a sample of the many titles about autism spectrum disorder that are available.

### General information, strategies and support

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### Supporting younger children

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### Adolescence

Molloy, H. & Vasil, L. (2004). *Asperger syndrome, adolescence, and identity: Looking beyond the label*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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### From the perspective of people with autism spectrum disorder

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## Websites and contacts

### Websites

Altogether Autism:

[www.altogetherautism.org.nz](http://www.altogetherautism.org.nz)

Autism New Zealand Inc:

[www.autismnz.org.nz](http://www.autismnz.org.nz)

Cloud 9 Children's Foundation:

[www.withyoueverystepoftheway.com](http://www.withyoueverystepoftheway.com)

Ministry of Education pages about autism spectrum disorder:

[www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/ASD](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/ASD)

The Autism Society of America:

[www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)

The National Autistic Society:

[www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

### Useful contacts for obtaining books, resources and specialised support

Altogether Autism

PO Box 146

Hamilton 3240

Autism New Zealand Inc

PO Box 42052

Tower Junction

Christchurch 8149

CCS Disability Action

PO Box 6349

Marion Square

Wellington

Cloud 9 Children's Foundation

PO Box 51176

Tawa

Wellington 5249

Donald Beasley Institute

PO Box 6189

Dunedin

IHC National Office

PO Box 4155

Wellington

Ministry of Education,

Special Education

PO Box 1666

Thorndon

Wellington



