

Understanding Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder that affects how a person communicates and relates to others. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a disability and a spectrum of disorders where presentation will vary with age and, in any one individual, vary over time.

Autistic Spectrum Disorders are characterized by a Triad of Impairment (Wing, 1981).

- **Impairment in communication, verbal and non-verbal**
- **Impairment in social interaction**
- **Inflexible thinking and behaviours**

There must be observed difficulties in all three areas of the Triad for a diagnosis and they must be apparent before the age of 36 months.

The characteristics of ASD may be more prominent at some ages than others. For example, autism can be difficult to diagnose in some adults due to the effects of their experiences and learning. Thus, it is helpful for parents of children to have a clear understanding of normal social, behaviour and language development so that they may understand more clearly when a child's development is a cause for concern.

There are around half a million people with an ASD in the UK today, that is about 1 in 100. If you include all the members of a family, autism touches the lives of over 2 million people every day.

In the UK, we commonly use the term Autistic Spectrum Disorders or ASD. This includes Autism with severe learning disabilities, High Functioning Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Autistic Spectrum Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (ASDNOS) or even Pervasive Development Disorder (PDD) or Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome.

People with ASDs have a range of abilities and difficulties. It is important to see people who have autism as individuals as well as considering their autism. We are all different, with differing characteristics, even if we have autism.

Autism is not a label; it is a signpost which indicates what education and support a person might need and therefore a diagnosis is **important**. An individual has a right to a diagnosis even if they chose subsequently not to share it with others.

Here is a list of three areas where impairments will be seen:

Communication, Verbal and Non-Verbal

Difficulty in making sense of, or using verbal or non-verbal communication, for example:

- Lack of speech, delayed speech development or poor or odd use of language
- Pedantic speech
- Impaired understanding and use of body language & facial expression, causing inappropriate gestures and expressions

- Poor intonation, rhythm and cadence in speech
- Literal understanding of language
- Poor understanding of humour, sarcasm, irony, double or implied meanings
- Difficulties with idiomatic language or slang.

Social Interaction

Difficulty with empathy or developing social empathy, for example

- Being unable to understand something from another's point of view
- Difficulties in making or maintaining friendships or sharing in others enjoyment and pleasures.
- Inappropriate social advances or behaviour.
- Difficulty understanding the actions and intentions of others.
- Problems in reciprocal dialogue or social timing – turn taking.
- Problems with proximity.
- Poor or inappropriate eye contact.

Flexibility of Thought and Behaviour

- Difficulties with flexible thinking. Leading to poor or odd creativity or imagination restricted to particular areas of interest
- Impaired imaginative play
- Restricted/narrow all absorbing interests
- Poor problem-solving ability, sorting out the steps in a task, not knowing where to start
- Difficulty making sense of new situations or suggesting a possible explanation of events
- Difficulty generalising previously acquired knowledge and skills to new situations
- Difficulty in drawing facts together to construct a higher level of meaning
- Sequencing difficulties, understanding time, cause, and effect
- Poor organisational skills.

Additional Difficulties

There can also be additional difficulties which appear with ASDs such as:

- Anxiety
- Hyper or Hypo sensitivities, affecting hearing, sense of smell or taste or skin sensitivity
- Hyperactivity
- Dyspraxia (especially with Asperger Syndrome)
- Obsession
- Depression (10 times commoner than in the normal population)
- Temper tantrums or violent behaviour
- Seemingly irrational fears
- Phobias
- Sleeping problems
- Eating phobias
- Behaviour disturbance, ticks, rocking, disinhibited and compulsive behaviour

Leslie Macdonald, Cert. ASD.

December 2016