

What is Autism?

The Autism Education Trust (AET) describes autism as a different way of being rather than as a 'deficient' or 'disordered' way of being. Being autistic does not mean you have an illness or disease. It means your brain works in a different way from other people. Autism is not a medical condition with treatments or a "cure". Autism is a processing difference that can have an impact on many areas of a person's life. **There is no 'typical' autistic person.** Every autistic individual has their own strengths, differences, interests, needs and their own unique story. While autistic people share similar characteristics to some degree, they are also all different from each other. This is because autism is considered a spectrum. **The autism spectrum is not linear from high ('functioning') to low ('functioning')** but varies in every way that one person might vary from another. Autistic people experience differences in four key areas: **Social Interaction:** the way they interact, play, and develop relationships; **Social Communication:** the way they communicate, understand and use language; **Information Processing:** differences in attention, interests and how they learn. They can be very focused on particular interests and may have a different way of being flexible, so often feel safer and more comfortable with routines and structure as this lessens uncertainty; **Sensory Processing:** Sensory differences can include hyper (high) or hypo (low) sensitivity in relation to the eight senses. These differences will vary from person to person and can actually fluctuate in their responsiveness depending on a number of different factors for example the time of day, stress levels, tiredness, or the environment.

Implications

Many autistic adults and children often state that **it is not their autism that poses them difficulties as such, but the expectations and responses they have from neurotypical (non-autistic) people.** In particular, the expectation to act, respond and learn in the same way as others. It should come as no surprise that many autistic children and young people experience anxiety at school. Some children hide or mask their anxiety, which can have a seriously detrimental impact on their mental and emotional health and some of

them try to gain as much control as possible. School is the place where they are going to experience increased uncertainty, the most people, the most potential change, and the least amount of control.

Top Tips

1. Know and understand the pupil; seek and act upon their views, feelings and perceptions using supportive systems like: Talking Mats; Sensory Checklists; Observations
2. Listen to parents/carers; their insight and experience should inform and enhance practice in your setting.
3. Increase the range of visual support in place to enhance independence, understanding, engagement and well-being.
4. Audit your classroom's sensory environment and adjust, where possible, in response to needs
5. Proactively support the pupil's social awareness, skills and inclusion; don't expect them to develop in this area purely by being exposed to social activity. Exposure to social demands without support can increase anxiety significantly.
6. Build in recuperation/chill-out times during the day.
7. Ensure key information about the autistic pupil; their strengths, interests and needs is shared with all staff working with them.

Further Advice

Useful Websites:
www.starsteam.org.uk

National Autistic Society:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Autism Education Trust:
www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk

Reading:
Martian in the Playground: Clare Sainsbury