

# FACT SHEET: Keeping Autism in Mind

With a clear understanding of the nature of Autism there is much that can be done to help people with Autism through their everyday life. In highlighting some of the features of Autism this article aims to show that with a range of practical support strategies we can help ease many difficulties. Our aims will always include:

## 1. Relieving the frustration of communication:

Any person with communication difficulties, without appropriate support, is likely to express him or herself in ways that others might find “difficult”. A person with Autism might have little ability to influence or negotiate the demands of the social environment i.e. to communicate basic needs, to articulate distress, or to ask for help. In addition, they will invariably have difficulty with receptive language (i.e. being able to fully understand what is being said). This aspect of language ability with Autism is often not recognized by people who are not familiar with the Autism Spectrum.

### “Do you understand?”

The person with Autism might have a seemingly impressive vocabulary (usually around their own special interests). However, people very close to them will be aware of the limits of that language ability. When asked “do you understand?” the child or adult with Autism might reply “yes”, having in mind that’s what they are expected to say. In fact, they might not fully understand the situation. Their ability to deal with the spoken word will also be greatly reduced once stress levels rise. Instances are known where individuals with Autism who generally have good comprehension and verbal skills lose those skills when they become stressed. They have simply been unable to process language which they could deal with quite easily when they are calm. Another factor to keep in mind is the longer processing time that is often required for the person to deal with other people’s spoken words (see “Strategies”).

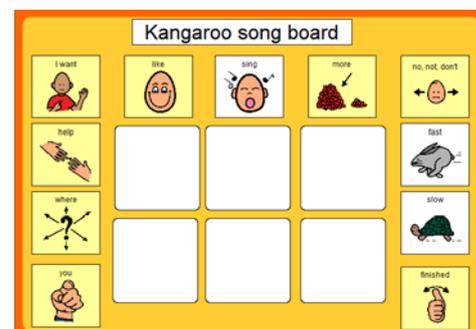
### Strategies:

- ❖ Allow extended time for the person to process the meaning of what has been said. Ten, twenty seconds or sometimes even a little longer might be required for a person with Autism to be able to process our language and respond. This might seem unduly lengthy. But, people are often surprised when they realize how well the person with Autism can understand our language when we are more patient, and simply wait for a response.



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- ❖ Provide visual supports according to the person's skills with representation. Visual supports can include: objects, photographs, computer generated supports e.g. Boardmaker, line drawings, pictures from magazines etc. The written word is, of course, for those more able. These visual supports can be incorporated into a timetable to show the sequence of everyday activities. Similar supports can also be extremely helpful for the person to express his or her needs and wishes (including making choices).



## 2. Providing structure to the environment:

Although large, open-plan classrooms are not ideal for children with Autism, much is now being done by teachers in many schools to provide structure within the open-plan environment.

***N.B: a more structured environment does not imply a more restrictive one. The structure enables people to understand the environment. They can SEE what is expected.***

### Strategies:

- ❖ Define space e.g. provide boundary markers where children are expected to be seated during periods such as mat time. Similarly, in work areas, place tape markers on table tops to show limits of work space.
- ❖ Label shelves and drawers to identify contents. In order to meet the needs of everyone within the environment it might be necessary to label with words and with pictorial representation (visual supports, as above).
- ❖ Colour code books and folders e.g. use coloured stickers to identify all materials that relate to specific subjects.
- ❖ Provide an independent work station within the classroom where the student can work without disturbance at tasks with which he or she is familiar.



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- ❖ Provide a structured approach with work systems enabling the person to work independently. Clearly identify how much work is to be completed, where to place completed work, and what they will do when the work is completed. Ensure that what comes next is something the person favours.

For other ideas and resources available on providing structure within educational approaches, especially for preschool and primary see: <http://www.teacch.com/>

### 3. Ensuring that the demands of a task are not too high:

People with Autism are likely to display a very uneven developmental profile. That is, they can be highly skilled in certain areas and extremely poorly skilled in other ways. Consequently, problems sometimes occur due to the assumption that because they are so skilled in one area, they will have a similar level of skill in other seemingly comparable ways. We should therefore keep in mind that if a person resists a specific task, or displays stress with the work in hand, we need to consider whether the demands of the task are too high. People with Autism can be very distressed by a sense of failure, and become upset if presented with tasks they do not understand.

#### Strategies:

If the person shows anxiety when presented with a task (and it's not known whether they have ever undertaken the task) do not press the issue. Allow a cooling off period by providing a task that you are sure they can undertake with ease (and preferably one that they will enjoy). Later, the more complex task could be taught, broken down into discrete parts, teaching one part at a time. Whether we are teaching a child in primary school or an adult in the employment sector, 'backward chaining' is often a useful teaching method.

#### Backward chaining:

- ❖ Demonstrate task (once or twice as necessary)
- ❖ Next time, the teacher *almost* completes the task
- ❖ Student completes the very last part of the task

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If necessary, provide a prompt to ensure praise can be given for completion of the task. On subsequent occasions the teacher again demonstrates the beginning of the task then hands it over to the student to complete. The aim is for the student to complete a little more of the task each time. Ultimately, they complete the entire task. Teaching in this way can be very effective for children and adults with Autism as it calls for their visual skills (usually far superior to their ability with language). Few words are generally needed. The person simply observes then follows with each step of the task.

#### **4. Accommodating routines and need for sameness:**

People with Autism can be extremely attached to routines. These routines may involve doing things in a certain way, or in a specific order. For example, for one child, it could mean taking a particular route to school; while for another person it might entail performing a particular task in a never-changing way (e.g. from undressing, taking a shower and dressing for bed).

It is often considered that this insistence on routines is a strategy the person employs to cope with a social world that they find overwhelming. It is as if the person makes the world manageable by reducing it, and imposing an order which makes the environment predictable and less confusing.

#### **Strategies:**

Always prepare the person with Autism for change. Use visual supports according to their level of skill— pictures, photographs, Boardmaker etc or the written word. A visual timetable can be helpful to *show* the student (i.e make readily apparent) which activities will occur and the sequence of the activities. The timetable could also include a picture of the teacher/support person to show impending staff changes.

***The person needs to be trained to use the timetable; thus, referring to the timetable becomes the primary routine.***

When reference to the timetable has become routine, the person is likely to be more accepting of the information that it provides. Timetables are known to be great tools of authority! While it is important to encourage toleration of change, it is important also to understand the way in which routines help the person to cope with an environment they sometimes find overwhelming.

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### Why disrupt a routine?

Often, there is no good reason to disrupt a routine. If a routine is not preventing learning or other meaningful activity, is not harming self or others and is not socially unacceptable there seems to be no reason to actively focus on disrupting the routine. If the routine helps the person to remain calm this is obviously good for their well-being. The calm person is more likely to be open to learning and generally enjoying activity.

### Changes to some routines

Incremental change can be made to routines that are stigmatizing for the person e.g. carrying large, inappropriate objects. In such cases changes could be made by a program which gradually replaces the object with a more appropriate or less obvious one. For example, provide a similar but slightly smaller object for a while; then smaller again. Over a period of time the person is likely to become more accepting of the smaller replacement. If the 'special object' can be attached to a key ring it can be kept close to hand most of the time.

Alternatively, an agreement could be reached whereby there are set times and places where they can carry their special object. Sometimes, detective work might be required in order to determine the appeal of a particular object. Is it the colour, shape or texture? Is it simply what it represents?

***Routines might change over time, but people with Autism will probably always adhere to a routine or two. They are often a source of great comfort in what is a complex environment for the person with Autism.***

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### 5. Respecting personal space:

A person with Autism might find the close proximity of others disturbing for a number of reasons. Apart from sensory issues (see below) the person might be confused by the intrusion of others. With language and social difficulty, sometimes they might be bewildered when another person moves into their personal space. They might feel anxious as to what they are expected to do with this other person so close.

#### Strategy:

Always consider whether a teaching /training style might be overly intrusive; or if the requirement for social proximity with others is too great. For example, a person who is expected to engage in a physical contact activity might cope for a short period of time and then, for no apparent reason, become distressed. In such instances, enable the person to have access to personal space, with reduced periods of close contact with others.

Consider lessening expectations for social participation: work gently and gradually to build the person's tolerance of social proximity and social demands. It is worthwhile noting that many children and older people with Autism will, in time, develop a tolerance and come to enjoy the closeness of familiar people with whom they feel secure.

### 6. Assisting with the Sensory:

Sensory differences associated with Autism have been well documented. Not all, but many people with Autism will experience sensory difficulties including: auditory (distress with sudden or certain sounds); tactile (dislike to being touched, aversion to touching certain substances); visual (might become fixated on flickering light or other repetitive movement); taste and smell (might react negatively to certain foods and smells). For some people with Autism sensory experiences can be overwhelming.

Adult individuals, able to articulate their experiences, have spoken in terms of physical pain especially with tactile sensation (when they are touched by others; or the feel of certain clothing). Discomfort in coping with sound is often recognized: the person covers his or her ears and their facial expression clearly shows discomfort or distress.

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## Strategies:

Remain alert to potential for sensory discomfort and alleviate the situation where possible. In certain situations we can:

- ❖ Provide ear muffs or other sound protection
- ❖ Enable the person to be warned of imminent sounds
- ❖ Consider suitability of the environment for the person e.g. shopping centre during peak shopping hours might induce sensory overload
- ❖ Be aware of person's response to touch
- ❖ Develop programs to help expand tactile tolerance i.e. introduce substances (e.g. play dough) in tiny amounts and expect brief contact; gradually increase amount and contact
- ❖ Provide personal space according to person's needs
- ❖ Expand upon the person's choice of foods cautiously

An Occupational Therapist could be helpful in dealing with sensory difficulties, especially if it becomes apparent the person's diet is inadequate due to food rejection.

## Summary:

With an understanding of the key characteristics of Autism and awareness of the person's preferences, we can often prevent difficulties arising for the individual. Our teaching and caring efforts meet greatest success when we can guide the children and adults with Autism along a smoother path throughout the day. Importantly, their days are made happier.