



**CLCGB**

*Your journey starts here...*

# Autism Spectrum Disorder

## What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability which affects how people communicate with and relate to others, it effects how they make sense of the world around them.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, so no individual with autism will be the same. Lorna Wing famously said: "When you've met one individual with autism – you've met one individual with autism"

Individuals with autism all share similar difficulties but it will affect each individual differently – some can live quite independent lives, while some have other accompanying disabilities such as a learning disability, ADHD, or anxiety. So each individual with autism is different – they have different needs and abilities and require different levels of support.

**Autism can be classified as impairments in communication, social interaction, sensory processing difficulties and the demonstration of restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours and interests.**

## Communication impairments

- Some children will have no speech or will have very limited speech
- May not comprehend others speech and will take longer to process and understand
- Find it difficult to understand verbal cues such as facial impressions
- Difficulty with literal interpretation – we need to be careful with the language we use as words or phrases can be confusing and misleading. For example "It's raining cats and dogs" might be taken literally
- May not understand the social purpose of conversation
- Turn taking in play and conversation is difficult

## Social Interaction impairments

- General awkwardness in social situations – while we can all feel awkward in some social situations this is magnified for individuals with autism

Find it difficult to make friends as they may not understand subtle social rules e.g. may not know it is inappropriate to stand too close to another person



- Inflexible thoughts and fixed interests e.g. will only want to talk about one particular topic or play the same game continuously

### **Sensory problems**

- Individuals with autism may experience under-sensitivity or over-sensitivity to sensory stimuli
- Sight – bright or flickering lights can be painful
- Touch – over-sensitivity to touch: may not like people touching them. In some cases a gentle touch given to comfort them is painful. However, some are under responsive to touch: they find deep pressure comforting, under sensitivity can be an issue because they could seriously hurt themselves but will not react or act upset – there is an obvious health and safety issue with this
- Hearing –very sensitive to noise as they have very acute hearing, so loud music can be overwhelming or painful
- Taste – particular issues with food, may only be able to eat foods of certain textures
- These sensory problems will greatly vary from child to child, but it is quite common that sensory overload in the environment is overwhelming for an individual with autism and can lead to a melt down!

### **Restricted repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests**

- Repetitive behaviour can be a sign of anxiety or excitement e.g. hand flapping, loud vocalisations. Often hand flapping or other repetitive behaviour can appear alarming and something we want to stop the child engaging in – however, in some cases repetitive behaviour may be that child's method of calming down or regulating themselves during times of high anxiety or excitement
- The smallest amount of change to a routine can be very distressing and upsetting
- Timings are important - if you tell them you'll do something in 5 minutes it is important to follow through on this

### **How to make CLCGB more accessible for children with autism**

Again, every child is different and so it is important to note that what might upset one child or work well with that child can have the opposite effect on another child with autism. So it's important to get to know the child as an individual and ask the parents what will work best for their son/daughter.

It can be really useful to give the parents a few questions to fill in about their child before they come along, asking questions such as:



*What does your child enjoy to do? i.e. favourite books, toys, activities*

*What does your child struggle with? i.e. sensory issues, change to routine, sitting quietly for long periods, people in their space*

*What can we do to help if your child becomes upset? i.e. is there a particular song that calms them down, do they need a quiet space*

*How does your child best communicate with others? i.e. written language, spoken language, sign language, communication device*

It would be good to make the answers to these questions available to all the leaders so everyone can be aware of how best to help the child!

### **A few more ideas**

- We can make church more accessible for children with autism by creating a low arousal environment. So we often try to avoid flickering lights and very loud music as this can be quite painful for the child and make it difficult for them to focus on anything else.
- Many children with autism respond very well to visuals paired with spoken language, so perhaps during the talk to enable the child to engage more, it can be useful to use pictures on the screen (if possible). However, try to avoid anything too overpowering or distracting – simple and straightforward visuals will work best for them.
- It can be really helpful to give the child a pillow or mat to sit on during the talk or other sitting down activities – this is their space, which no one else can come in to. It often gives them a sense of security and comfort having their own space.
- Whenever possible, it is really beneficial to provide the child with one on one care. But this is not always feasible - when one on one care is not possible, initially introducing the child to a particular leader can help them settle in and perhaps their parent could be asked to explain to them if they are having a problem or need help this is the adult they should go to. Children with autism value routine and so having a familiar adult who will be there each week will be a source of comfort for them. (However, often we find that the child might decide they want to choose a different adult, so don't worry if this happens – it's not anything personal!!)
- It can be beneficial to ask the child's parents if the child would like to bring and wear ear defenders if they typically would use them (not all children with autism will use them), these allow the child to still hear but it mutes out all the other overwhelming sounds.
- Unstructured social time can be scary and difficult for an individual with autism, they will not be sure what they are meant to be doing during this time and may become socially isolated. If this is the case it can be good to provide the child with some structure by explaining what is happening and encourage them to join in with other children as they play.



- If a child becomes overwhelmed or upset, it can be a lovely idea to have a 'Quiet Room' this is a safe space in which the child can go to when things get too much. This room doesn't need to be anything fancy, simply just a quiet room with maybe a few toys they would enjoy - sensory toys such as a beanbag, fluffy toys, a sensory bottle (see picture at end), and squeeze toys.  
- it is useful to ask the parent to bring their child to the sensory room at the start of the session and explain to them they can come here if they need a break. Also the parent could tell you anything to add or remove from the room to make it a calmer space for their child!

*(However, if you find the quiet room is too enjoyable for the child and they want to spend the whole night there, maybe try introducing "I need a break" cards – this can simply be written on a piece of paper. The child may have for example 5 cards per night they can use, each card allows 5 minutes in the quiet space. Using a timer on your phone to show a countdown from 5 minutes can be a good idea – often the child will love watching it!*

*But again, while these cards can be a really good and positive thing for the child, we have also seen them learn to use the card to get out of doing something they don't want to do rather than using it because they genuinely need a break and feel overwhelmed – for example if a child continually uses the quiet space to avoid the talk, initially try and encourage the child to sit and listen to the talk for 1 minute, and then go to the quiet space, and very gradually build upon this so they stay and listen for longer!*

## **How to talk to a child with autism**

Again, the ability of each child will be very different so it's important to ask the parents how much the child can understand and communicate themselves

- high functioning children will have excellent language and communication skills
- lower functioning children may have limited language and understanding
- some children appear to have good language, however, they may be very skilled at imitating those around them without not fully understanding what is being asked of them / what they are saying!

So again it's always good to check with parents the communication level of their child and the best method of communication to use. Some methods of communication include:

- Makaton – this is a form of sign language which is specifically for people with autism and differs from British Sign Language. If you find a child uses makaton and you want to learn some basic signs; simple signs can be found on YouTube or please contact me for resources!



- Picture Exchange Communication System – this is the use of pictures to communicate their needs

Speaking as concisely and clearly as possible is important, if the child is overloaded with words they may not understand what is expected of them.

So for example rather than saying to them “OK it’s time for us to sit down now” try and just say “Sitting” or “Sit in green chair” – this way the child understands what they are expected to do.

Most children with autism respond really well to “**First** and **then**” – so for example you could say “**First** sitting, **then** juice” or “**First** story, **then** games.”

If a child has to wait for their turn in a line it can helpful to say “Waiting for 10, waiting for 9 waiting for 8....”etc.

If a child is lying down on the floor when they are upset trying saying “Standing in 3... 2... 1.”

As stated earlier clear communication is important, so try to be very precise with timings i.e. if you say 1 minute they will expect to wait for 1 minute and may become distressed after a minute passes!

## **Routine and Transitions**

Everyday life for a person on the autism spectrum can be extremely confusing and cause great anxiety. So a great way to provide them with a sense of order, security and control over their environment is to ensure there is a set routine and structure. So, if it is possible to have events in a set order each week this can be really helpful.

Use of a **social story** - this is a sheet which has the order of activities at CLCGB (an example of a social story is at the end). This could be sent out to the child before they come along or simply available on the night for the child to view. If a child is coming to CLCGB for the first time sending out a picture of the leaders can be helpful – just to give the child time to prepare for and familiarise themselves with the new environment as much as possible.

Transitions from one activity into the next can be stressful so to make this as easy as possible for the child try and give him/her enough time to prepare for the change, e.g. give them count downs: “5 more minutes of games” “1 more minute of games”

If the child doesn't listen to your instruction initially try counting down slowly from 5, most will really respond to this: “Playing is all done in 5...4...3...2...1”

Simply telling a child “Games are all done” or just saying “All done” can be very useful.

If there is going to be any changes to the routine for example differences in set activities at Christmas/Easter give the child plenty of warning to prepare, as unpredictability can increase their anxiety.

## **Challenging behaviours**

- As discussed earlier, some children with autism cannot effectively communicate to us there wants/needs. We can understand how frustrating and distressing it



would be if we could not communicate to those around us something we need. Unfortunately, challenging behaviours are often an effective way for children with autism to communicate to us if there is something they need/want!

- So if a child becomes very distressed, it's important to consider what is going on in the environment before the challenging behaviour occurs. For example, they may have wanted attention/didn't want to join in a particular activity/felt overwhelmed by the noise in the room. Once we have worked out what the cause is we're better equipped to avoid this situation again in the future and help the child to overcome their distress.
- As with any child, a way to reduce challenging behaviour is to 'catch the good behaviour' so make a big deal of praising the child when they are engaging in good and positive behaviour. So if a child signals to you, even by a hand gesture, they need your help with something praise them saying "Great asking" "High five for good asking" or if you see them playing well with their peers or listening well try and praise them as much as possible – this positive attention will help them better understand how they should be behaving and encourage them to act that way more often.
- Often in the work place I'm advised to ignore a child who is throwing a tantrum until they calm down (if the tantrum is for attention/sweets – not if the child is distressed or overwhelmed by noises or movements etc!!) this can be very difficult, and also be quite disruptive for the other children in a structured environment, so won't always be possible!
- If in the situation where a child does have a tantrum or shows other challenging behaviours; again try and look out for any appropriate behaviour and praise them and encourage them as soon as you see them.
  - For example, I once was with a child with autism who was having a full meltdown in a park because it was so busy and loud, when his shoes came off I said "Shoes on" and he lifted his foot and let me help him put his shoe on even though he was still screaming and crying, so I immediately praised him saying "Well done" "Good listening" "Thank you for listening" etc, and the tantrum ended within about 1 minute.



Finally, don't worry if all the above suggestions aren't practical or feasible for you – it is so encouraging that as an organisation you are encouraging children with autism to attend and that you are willing to learn how to better include and make these children feel comfortable. Don't be discouraged if you feel the child doesn't understand the stories or talks – we may not ever know what they have understood, but God does! Often the best and most practical thing we can do for these children and their families is show them God's love through patience, kindness, understanding and inclusion.

Example of a social story! They do not need to be as elaborate as this, drawing pictures and writing the words ourselves is just as effective!



Example of a sensory bottle – just put some glitter in a water bottle! The kids love it :)

