

Autism Fact Sheet



Autism can be seen as a neurological difference or lifelong development disorder which affects communication, interaction and imagination. It can present very differently in males and females. It is on a spectrum which means that everyone with autism is different. Students diagnosed with High Functioning Autism may be of average or above average intelligence and have very sophisticated language and reasoning skills. However, they can find it hard to negotiate many aspects of daily life, especially social situations like friendships. They may be thought of as odd, quirky, or difficult because people do not understand the way they are thinking or what is causing the behaviour.

Autism often exists alongside hyperactivity, dyslexia and dyspraxia, as well as sensory sensitivities.

There are other names for autism used by some people, such as:

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – the medical name for autism
- Autism spectrum condition (ASC) – used instead of ASD by some people
- Asperger's (or Asperger syndrome) – used by some people to describe autistic people with average or above average intelligence

Good practice when teaching or supporting students with autism:

- **Use clear, direct communication and be explicit** – avoid using subtlety, metaphors, sarcasm, questions instead of instruction and don't expect the student to understand jokes.
- **Set out clear rules and expectations and be consistent** – this is reassuring to the student.
- **Stay calm if the student pushes the boundaries** – it is probably unintentional; they may need frequent reminders about expectations, as they may not generalise expectations from one situation to another.
- **Don't insist on eye contact** – some students find this very distressing.
- **Be flexible** – if the student has a preferred seat in the room, work this into your seating plan; accept that the student may sometimes use repetitive movements or noises if they are becoming anxious but try to reduce their anxiety where possible.
- **Give advance warning of any changes to routine** – this can help reduce anxiety and repetitive behaviours. This includes advanced notification of timetable changes, trips, visits, guest speakers, placements etc.
- **Allow the student to take some 'time out' if they are becoming distressed** – so that they can go to a pre-arranged safe area.
- **Be explicit when setting tasks** – state how much time to spend on it, how long it should be, what should or shouldn't be included, otherwise the student may do far more than you intended or focus too much on one aspect.
- **Check understanding of tasks** – ideally with the student individually during and at the end of the class (in the case of independent study/homework expectations); ask if they have any questions.
- **Explain emotions in a clear and sensitive way** – the student may not understand their own emotions or 'pick up' on how others are feeling.
- **Encourage the student to use reason to understand a situation in which they have had an overly emotional response** – they may feel overwhelmed by their emotions.
- **Be aware of the impact of sensory overload** – if a student is triggered by sensory inputs, be mindful of noise, light, and other environmental factors. If a student is finding these difficult, validate and support them.
- **Discourage over-thinking and catastrophising** – encourage the student to see how they could solve problems that may arise in a practical way.
- **Actively manage group work and pair work** – so that students know who to work with and are not left isolated.
- **Be alert to the behaviour of other students** – students with autism can be vulnerable to bullying, which can cause low self-esteem – encourage other students to be understanding.

