



Autism Spectrum Condition

Information for parents



MIDLANDS PSYCHOLOGY

What Next?

When parents first hear that their child has an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), they often have a lot of questions. We have written this leaflet to try to answer some of the more common ones. We also hope it will give you some general advice that you might find helpful in supporting your child.

The needs of children with autism, and those of their families, change over time. In the first instance, many parents find it helpful to gain an understanding of how autism affects their child and his or her behaviour. This can help them decide what strategies they can try to help their child in different situations. Parents of newly-diagnosed children can also start to make contact with a range of services that work to support children who have autism.

Autism is a lifelong condition. As children grow and their needs change, families often find that they need to 'dip' in and out of services as necessary.

There are times when you might be seeking some extra help for your child in school, or at other times you might need advice over the telephone. You might be looking for a social group for your child, or in need of a bit of support yourself – maybe some information about respite. We hope this booklet will help you take the first steps to understanding your child's condition and what kind of support is available to you as a family.

So, what is it?

Autism is known as a *Spectrum Condition*, which means that it affects each person differently. It occurs in children irrespective of their intellect, meaning that it can affect children with learning disabilities or those who are above average intelligence or somewhere (anywhere) in between.

What unites everyone with autism is that they have significant difficulties in three different areas. Known as the *Triad of Impairments*, these are Social Interaction, Social Communication and Social Imagination.

Terminology

As a service, and following much discussion with parents, we have agreed to use the term 'Autism Spectrum Condition' (ASC) as the diagnostic term for children whose difficulties place them on the autism spectrum. However, you may hear a range of other terms in use and this can sometimes be confusing. These include Asperger's Syndrome, High Functioning Autism, Classic Autism and Childhood Autism (to name just a few).

The most recent diagnostic criteria have moved away from breaking autism down into different categories and instead use a single umbrella term in recognition that, regardless of level of functioning, people with autism all struggle with the same things.

As a result, the term ASC (or simply 'autism') is used to describe all children on the autism spectrum.



Finding out more about Autism

Now that your child has a diagnosis of autism, one of the first steps to supporting them is learning more about the condition. There are a number of ways you can do this.

You will receive an invitation to our Introduction to Autism course. This is an excellent opportunity to learn about the types of difficulties that children with autism have and to begin to develop more ideas about how to support your child. You will also get to meet other families who will have shared your experiences. Knowing you are not alone on this journey can be helpful.

The Internet brings a world of information to your fingertips enabling you to access forums, support groups, media and general information as well as more detailed guides to autism and the latest research in this field. However, when you first type 'autism' into your search engine you may find yourself overwhelmed by the sheer amount and variety of information you get, some of which is good and some of which is not so good. We have put together a list of reliable websites to help you begin your search. This list is on the Information page of our website (www.midlandspychology.co.uk) under the *autism* section. Paper copies of the list are also available.

There are a number of very helpful books about autism but, again, beginning your search for these can be overwhelming. We have started you off by putting together a booklist for you (see the resource list on our Information page, details are given above).

Remember that you can pick up the phone and call us during office hours and we'll be happy to answer any general questions you have about autism.

Social Interaction

We recommend that your child takes up the option of attending one of our Adaptive Skills workshops in order to improve their social communication and to learn to generalise these skills to other situations. Details of the workshops run by Midlands Psychology are advertised via our email mailing list and are also posted on Facebook and twitter.

Midlands Psychology provides a number of social opportunities for children with autism to help increase their opportunity for social interaction. (See the information page on our website for further details.)

You may also wish to investigate other options available with regard to specialist clubs for children with an ASC, such as the Stafford Branch of the National Autistic Society's Lego Club. We have included some of these in our resource list for you: you might be able to find more!

Enrolment in non-ASC specific social groups can also be beneficial for higher functioning children, particularly if these are semi-structured (such as scouts, guides, boys/girls brigade) or focus on a special interest.

It is important that children who have an ASC are placed in a group with supportive peers to minimise the chance of bullying. Peer group awareness training may be a useful option to consider at a later date so that peers treat children who have additional needs with understanding.



Social imagination

Difficulties with social imagination affect a child's ability to predict what is going to happen in a situation or to link cause and effect.

Because of difficulties with prediction, children who have autism do not cope well with change. Your child will benefit from consistency and routine, with adults working together to provide this across different environments. When faced with change, it will help to give some warning and also to help your child understand what to expect. Visual prompts such as timetables and sand timers can be helpful in moving children from one activity to another.

Transitions in school can be particularly challenging but can be made easier through good preparation including extra visits to the child's new class or school, meeting their new teacher, taking photos of staff and buildings and so on. It's all about taking the mystery out of things.

You might want to prepare ahead for other things that are out of the ordinary, such as a visit to hospital or your family holiday. Make finding out about it a mini "project" for you and your child.

Children with poor social imagination may have difficulties thinking about things from other people's perspectives, imagining how other people may respond, think or feel, or recognising that their ideas and opinions can differ from their own.

The resource list on the Information page of our website includes Comic Strip Conversations (Carol Gray). These can be used to help children to think about what is



happening in a situation, as well as what people might be thinking and feeling.

Social Stories (also by Carol Gray) teaches children about expectations for a certain situation.

Social Communication

Communication difficulties can often be quite subtle. For example, a child might have a good vocabulary and can therefore appear to understand everything that is said, but may miss how tone of voice or body language can change the whole meaning of a sentence. Likewise, children who have an ASC may not use eye contact and gesture appropriately to support their speech (e.g. he or she might be listening but their posture and lack of eye contact can suggest otherwise). There is also a tendency to interpret language literally which often leads to misunderstandings. It is important to be clear and unambiguous when giving information.

In addition, reflecting on possible misinterpretations can help to understand behaviours that could otherwise be interpreted as 'naughty'.

Our Adaptive Skills programmes generally include modules on the use of non-verbal and verbal communication skills. They provide the opportunity to learn and practice communication skills in a safe and nurturing environment.

You can also work with your child at home with simple techniques such as practising facial expressions in a mirror, playing "emotions charades" and viewing programmes with minimal verbal language (such as "Mr Bean") or even watching something with the volume turned off and trying to guess from people's body language and facial expressions what is happening in a scene.

There are also some good books available that provide advice on improving communication skills (see resource list for suggestions).



Help in school...

Many families first seek help because their child is beginning to struggle in school. Once their child has a diagnosis of autism, school may be the highest priority for them when they are seeking help.

- If your child is in mainstream school, the school may refer to the Autism Outreach Team who will be able to give guidance on the child's management within the school setting, if needed.
 - In some cases, teachers and other school staff need to be aware that your child could appear inappropriately challenging without intentionally undermining them.
 - School may put an Individual Education Plan into place to help address any learning or social needs in school.
 - Some children with autism need help over and above this and may be eligible for assessment for an 'Education, Health and Care Plan' setting out their Special Education Needs. Your school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) can advise you about eligibility.
 - Older children with autism sometimes need additional support with accessing examinations in school. This can be for a variety of needs, such as sensory challenges, anxiety, or difficulties organising themselves in exams. Schools can make reasonable adjustments, if appropriate, in order to increase your child's ability to participate in examinations. This is not to give the child an advantage but to "level the playing field".
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Introducing your child to their diagnosis

What you tell your child about his or her diagnosis will vary, depending on their age and level of functioning. You need to think as a family about when and how to do this. Some children will only need to know that they struggle in social situations or worry a lot about changes and therefore need a bit of extra help with these things. Others may find it helpful to learn more specific details about their condition and how it affects them so that they can make choices about the support they need.

There are a number of fictional books available in which the main character has autism. These can be helpful in portraying autism in a positive light and you can begin to think with your child about similarities between them and the characters in the stories. For older children, there are books written specifically to introduce children and young people to their condition. (See resource list for ideas).

Looking after yourself...

Looking after a child with autism is hard work! Many parents find it helps to attend an appropriate support group especially for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Conditions. Parents are a wonderful resource for one another. As well as meeting people who have had similar experiences to you, other parents can share their own experiences about things they have found helpful.

Getting support through other agencies and organisations

Our resource list includes details of other organisations which might be of help to you. Although we update our information on a regular basis, we are aware that these details can change frequently.

Accessing support through Midlands Psychology

Once your child has a diagnosis of autism, you have open access to the Midlands Psychology autism service and can telephone us for advice whenever you need it (see back page for contact details).

You do not need to be referred back to the service if you need help - just get in touch.



Our Introduction to Autism course is a 'rolling' course. If you cannot attend your first invitation, you are welcome to join at any time. This means that you can look out for it coming again to a venue near you (or somewhere else, if you prefer). It also means that if one parent is unable to attend, they can come to a later session or that you can attend again later for a 'top-up'.

Drop-in advice sessions are advertised regularly. These are meetings held in community venues where you can call in without having to make an appointment, have a cup of coffee and grab some face to face advice from someone with autism expertise. Our Parent Volunteers are usually also on hand for a friendly chat, should you feel you need it.

Training courses and workshops are also run regularly. These include topics such as, Sleep, Sensory Difficulties and anxiety.

We work individually with many families who need a one-to-one approach, providing counselling and psychological therapies to help with specific difficulties. We also provide specialist advice on sensory-motor, speech and language difficulties and psychological support for children who have a learning disability.

We work collaboratively with colleagues in other services in order to make sure we provide the best support for your child.

We run regular groups which we will tell you about by email, Facebook and twitter. If you do not have access to a computer, we can send you details by post – just let us know.





A bit about us...

Midlands Psychology is a Social Enterprise

We are a not-for-profit service, whose aim is to work with service users to provide local services according to need.

We believe in placing the family at the centre of everything we do and work in close partnership with our service users, who have a meaningful and direct say in how services are provided.

We re-invest surplus monies to develop more services and facilities for those who use them.

We use local goods and suppliers and promote Staffordshire wherever we can.

Contact us at:

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