

# Autistic Spectrum Disorder

## Meet Gethin

He is the school chess champion and is very good with information technology.

He can also tell you everything you would ever need to know about The Lord of the Rings.

But he finds it very difficult to make and keep friends and gets very anxious at break and lunchtimes.

Often, he gets into trouble because of misunderstandings or his over-reaction to any minor changes that occur during the school day

## Facts

ASD is a term used to describe a variety of disorders associated with autism. It is important to note that individuals with ASD could range from those with severe learning difficulties to those who have above-average intelligence. People with ASD who are highly intelligent may be referred to as having Asperger syndrome or High Functioning Autism.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong disability for which there is no known cure. It is often referred to as 'the hidden disability'. 1 in 100 of the population have ASD. It is more common in boys than girls.

People with ASD have a common set of characteristics known as the Triad of Impairment. This means that they have difficulties with social and emotional understanding, all aspects of communication regardless of their language level and a lack of flexibility in thinking and behaviour. Sometimes people with ASD are not diagnosed until adulthood and this can sometimes lead to feelings of extreme loneliness, confusion and depression.

In addition to the difficulties highlighted above, individuals with ASD tell us about the reaction they can have to sensory stimuli. They may be distressed by certain noises, lighting, colour, tastes or smells. They may seek out visual stimulation by staring at objects from unusual angles or spinning and flicking objects under a light. They may seek physical stimulation by spinning, flapping hands or rocking and refuse to wear certain items of clothing.

In addition to the ASD, individuals may have other co-morbid difficulties such as Developmental Co-ordination Disorder or Dyslexia.

It is important to remember that each individual with ASD is unique and will have their own specific needs and preferences. There is no 'one size fits all' for these children just like any others.

## What to look for

- Low tolerance of peer groups and a dislike of sharing or taking turns
- Encounters problems in social games and often does not like to lose
- Inappropriate social behaviour or play activities
- Little or no empathy for others
- Expresses own desires – and can appear egocentric and self-centred
- Socially aloof or awkward
- Simple social actions are often a complicated process eg lining up, personal space, following a conversation
- Restricted interests or an extreme focus on a particular topic eg trains, dinosaurs, Ancient Rome
- Needs to think carefully before responding to a question/instruction and sometimes appears not to hear what is being said
- Takes things literally eg 'Pull your socks up', 'Get your skates on'
- Unable to use imagination to create models or pictures
- Black and white rigid views – can often appear to be racist or sexist
- Sarcasm or subtle jokes are misunderstood or lost
- Difficulties judging the cause and effect of their own behaviour
- Extreme frustration which can lead to an aggressive outburst
- Difficulties with organisation unless given visual instruction
- An extreme reaction to any change in routine eg an unexpected change in the timetable

## What to do

- Observe the child in a range of activities and settings, paying attention to social interaction and communication
- Talk to the child about any likes/dislikes he or she may have in terms of sensory issues eg smells, lighting, textures etc
- Build up a profile of strengths and areas of need

### Some strategies are:

- Provide visual clues to the content of the lesson and make a visual timetable for the child so that he/she knows exactly what is going to happen
- Provide visual prompts during individual work sessions
- Help the child to express his/her feelings using pictorial or visual aids eg feelings fans, traffic lights
- Always pre-warn the child of any changes that are likely to occur eg a fire alarm, change in staffing, Xmas concert etc
- Be predictable, consistent and reliable

- Encourage the wider social circle to adopt the same approaches
- Give the child time to process language and check for understanding
- Avoid abstract terms, jokes, figures of speech or sarcasm
- Keep instructions as simple as possible
- Always begin an instruction with the child's name. Individuals with ASD may not think of themselves as 'Everyone' or 'Class'
- Provide opportunities for the transfer of skills - these will not be automatically transferred from one subject to another
- Provide alternative activities at break and lunch times. Many individuals find these times very stressful. Transition between lessons - and in particular changing for PE - can also cause anxiety - so make flexible arrangements
- Give rewards that are motivational eg time on the computer or examining a special interest. Conventional rewards such as certificates or stickers can be meaningless to some individuals with ASD
- Involve home - create a home-school diary
- Examine any sensory issues in the environment - lighting, seating, smells, textures that may cause distress eg some young children with ASD find the material of the carpet very uncomfortable
- Be sensitive to issues such as lining up or eye contact and appreciate that there may be very real sensory issues here

## Where to find help

School ALNCo  
 Advisory or School Improvement Service  
 Speech and Language Therapist  
 Educational Psychologist

### Useful Websites

[www.awares.org](http://www.awares.org)      [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

### Useful Books

Bowen, M and Plimley, L (2009) *The Autism Inclusion Toolkit*, London: Sage Publications

Hanbury, M (2005), *Educating Pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Practical Guide*, London: Sage Publications

Sinsbury, C (2009, Second Edition) *Martian in the Playground*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

### Useful Suppliers or Specialist Resources:

The following websites are worth visiting to see a range of resources and/or video clips on ASD:

[www.thegraycentre.org](http://www.thegraycentre.org)      [www.teach.com](http://www.teach.com)  
[www.youtube.co.uk](http://www.youtube.co.uk)      [www.teachers.tv](http://www.teachers.tv)  
[www.autismni.org](http://www.autismni.org)