

AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER

PARENT AND TEACHER INFORMATION SHEET

WHAT IS AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER?

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is commonly defined as a triad of impairments in social interaction, communication and imagination abilities. It is characterised by an intense narrow focus of interest and repetitive or restrictive behaviour. As a spectrum disorder, the severity of symptoms can vary greatly between individuals.

American Psychiatric Association (2013)

HOW COMMON IS AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER?

In a UK school-based population study, around 1% of children aged 5-9 had autism. Autism is more commonly diagnosed in males, with 3 boys diagnosed to every girl. This gender difference may be explained by differences in the expression of the disorder between boys and girls, although this is debated.



Baron-Cohen et al. (2009), Loomes et al. (2017)

DIFFICULTIES FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER



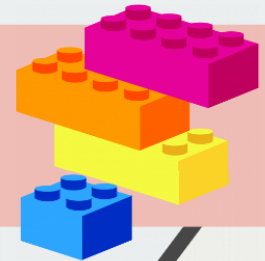
- Forming and maintaining relationships
- Understanding nonliteral language e.g sarcasm or metaphors
- Coping with change - insistence on routine
- Instigating or engaging in imaginative play

Boyd & Shaw (2010)

STRENGTHS ASSOCIATED WITH AUTISM

- Spatial reasoning - superior ability to visualise shapes in 3D
- Attention to detail - superior ability to spot minor changes
- Pitch discrimination - superior ability to distinguish sounds

Stevenson & Gernsbacher (2013), Smith & Milne (2009), O'Connor (2012)



WHY ARE MORE BOYS DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM THAN GIRLS? - CURRENT DEBATE

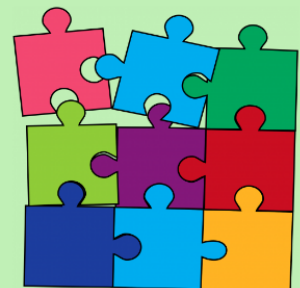
'FEMALE AUTISM PHENOTYPE'

Perhaps autism is expressed differently in girls, meaning that they do not fit the profile usually associated with autistic boys. For example, girls with autism often have better expressive behaviours and communication skills. Therefore, it may be that fewer girls are diagnosed because of the diagnostic tools used, rather than the actual prevalence of autism.

'THE EXTREME MALE BRAIN' - EMPATHISING/SYSTEMISING THEORY


Traits associated with ASD may be thought of as extremes of 'typical' male strengths and weaknesses. For example, autistic individuals show highly developed system skills but lacking empathy abilities. Similarly, males are typically stronger at working with systems but weaker at when it comes to empathising. Therefore, males may be more predisposed to autism because their brains are naturally configured this way. Girls, on the other hand, may be less likely to develop autism because their brains are oriented towards empathising rather than system skills.

Lai et al. (2015), Baron-Cohen (2002)




AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER

BENEFITS AND COSTS OF DIAGNOSTIC LABELLING

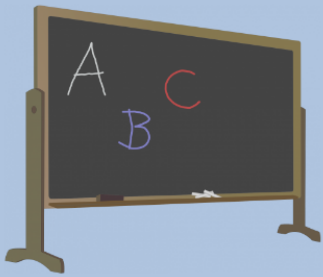
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- 1) Labels can help individuals and families feel that their difficulties are real
 - 2) Labels can help individuals and their families feel less alone and find others like themselves.
 - 3) Labelling can inform identification of trends and allow for the effective provision of resources.
 - 4) Labels allow the grouping of individuals for research, and effective communication between researchers.

Avdi et al. (2000), Solvåg (2007)

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- 1) Labels can lead to misattribution; environmental influences of child's behaviour are ignored
 - 2) Labelling can lead to child disempowerment; they are told they cannot control their condition
 - 3) Labels require diagnostic testing; child's needs are often put on hold while waiting for assessment
 - 4) Labelling can lead to a focus on what is wrong with a child rather than what is right with them

Woodcock (2009)

INFORMAL WAYS TO HELP AN AUTISTIC CHILD



Use a mutually agreed routine and prepare them for any necessary changes; visual supports will help them better understand this routine and the school day. Simplify communication and allow time for the child to process information. Consider how you can incorporate the child's intense interest into their learning. Be mindful of the working environment - noisy or visually busy environments can be overwhelming for an autistic child. Establish good communication with parents and carers, who know their child best. Finally, teach autism awareness and acceptance schoolwide.

National Autistic Society (2017)

WHEN TO SEEK AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST

When the learning and/or behaviour difficulties of a child cannot be solved by the usual means implemented by a school, it is advised that they seek help from an educational psychologist (EP). EPs operate at several levels: they work with individual children, with teachers and parents, with schools and with local authorities and organisations. EPs work to help to shape and improve delivery of teaching and facilitate better learning at each level in education.



HOW CAN AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST HELP?

First, an EP will clarify the problem and check the need for their involvement. Next, they work to create a brief (an outline of the aspects of the problem) and discuss the desired outcome of their involvement with all concerned parties. Then, the EP will work to generate tentative guiding hypotheses about the nature of the problem. These hypotheses are then tested to gain a better assessment of the problem and identify its dimensions. These dimensions are then integrated into an action plan which is agreed with all involved (e.g. child, parent and school).

The plan is then implemented and reviewed over time.

Monsen et al. (1998)

FOR MORE USEFUL INFORMATION AND
ADVICE VISIT WWW.AUTISM.ORG

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