Communication! Communication!

An information booklet for those living and working with young children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder

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Foreword
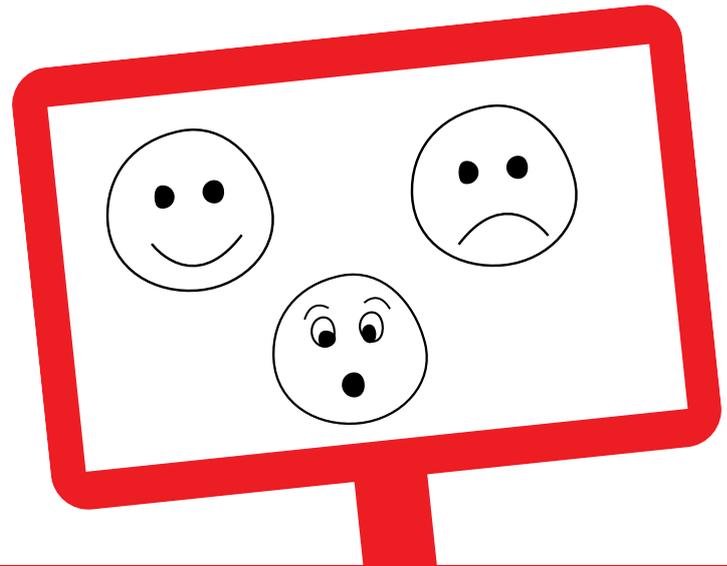
What is an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

ASD is a developmental disability that affects how children understand the world. The intellectual ability of children with ASD can range from severe learning difficulties, with little or no verbal communication, to above average intelligence with an articulate command of language. Each child with an ASD is unique and will have their own individual needs and preferences. There is no 'one size fits all' for these children just like any others.

However, regardless of intellectual ability all children on the autistic spectrum will have core difficulties with their:

» Communication

» Social Interaction and

» Flexibilty of thought.

This is known as **The Triad of Impairment.**

Children with an ASD may not want to communicate. They often do not know that gestures, facial expression and different tones of voice have a particular meaning.

The **social skills** of children with ASD are not as well developed as their mainstream peers. They may avoid eye contact, dislike turn taking/sharing and only enjoy limited and repetitive play. They may not make any distinction between the way they behave with strangers and familiar adults. Sometimes they will insist upon rules and routines and get very distressed if everything is not on their own terms. Often children with an ASD have no sense of danger.

Children with an ASD will have difficulties with their imaginary skills and an **ability to think in a flexible way.** They will often like routine and structure in their life and find change difficult. They may become fixated with particular objects or topics e.g. Thomas the Tank Engine or Disney characters. Sometimes they will focus on the smaller detail and ignore the bigger picture.

In addition to the difficulties highlighted above, individuals with an ASD tell us about the reactions they can have to **sensory** stimuli. They may be distressed by certain noises, lighting, colour, tastes or smells. They make 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.

Developing Communication Skills

This booklet focuses on developing the communication skills of young children with an ASD. Communication is a child's natural way of socialising and enables them to have their needs met. This process starts from the moment we are born. Unlike their peers, communication does not come easily to children with ASD because they have difficulty in understanding language and expressing themselves. Children with ASD are often very dependent upon someone else to initiate communication and social interaction. As an adult, you may have to give the child with ASD a very definite reason to make communication worthwhile!

Communication is more than the spoken word. Children with ASD may communicate in other ways (Autism NI, 2005). They might:

> » Cry or scream
> » Move their body next to people and things they are interested in or turn their body away
> » Use gestures or facial expressions
> » Reach with an open hand to get things they want
> » Take your hand to get you to do things for them
> » Look at things they want
> » Point at things, but not look at you
> » Look and Point at things and then look back at you
> » Communicate using pictures or photographs
> » Use echolalia i.e. repetition of other people's words.

Adults must look for any little sign that the child is trying to communicate a need.

Some young children with an ASD may however have a good command of the spoken word, especially in relation to a topic that interests them. Although the language may appear sophisticated, on closer examination, there will often be a lack of clear understanding. They may take things literally and conversations may be very one sided.

Behaviour as Communication

(Plimley, Bowen and Morgan, 2007)

For the child with ASD any form of extreme behaviour is likely to be a means of communication. We need to pay attention to the message it conveys, or the behaviour will not be changed. What function does the behaviour serve? For example, Does it get them what they want? Does it make people go away? Is it because of an extreme sensory overload? Is it illness, fatigue or hunger?

Try to look at this behaviour in another way. Do not view it as deliberate or naughty. A positive approach to the child and the behaviour is more likely to give a positive result. The difficult behaviour will not be speedy or easy to change but if we look for triggers and its underlying message, we may be able to replace the behaviour with a more appropriate way of communicating feelings and alleviate tension on both sides.

Feeling fans and cards like the ones shown here are a useful tool to help children express their emotions.

Activities to Encourage Interaction

It is important to make this a fun experience for both child and adult. The following activities can be used to gain attention and encourage the child to interact with you. It is important to note that some individuals with an ASD say that eye contact is very painful for them and others tell us that they find it difficult to use two senses at once. If they are listening to you, then they may not be able to look at you.

- **Balloons and Ball Games**

  Blow them up and bounce them, throw them and draw faces on them! Blow them up and feel the air coming out of them. Make noises as you play. Play catch or hide the ball behind your back or under your sweater. Use beanbags in the same way.

- **Bubbles and Feathers**

  Use bubbles at bath time- Encourage your child to make them pop- say 'pop' each time they do. Blow feathers within your child's line of vision.

- **Peek a Boo games**

  Play behind furniture or curtains. Use puppets or make wooden spoon faces disappear behind the settee. Put a towel over your head, then remove it. Hide your face with your hands. Use finger puppets which can easily disappear behind your back. Always use simple language during the activity such as 'Going, going, gone!', 'Peep- po!' and 'Back again!'.

- **Looking Games**

  Children with an ASD often pay attention to detail. So change things! Put a saucer on top of a cup, put the pieces of a puzzle in the wrong place or a stacking toy in the wrong order.

- **Feely Boxes**

  Show child that you are putting an object of interest e.g. a favourite toy/object into a box. Put the lid on the box and then slowly remove it. Let the child put his hand into the box, take it out and play with it.

- **Coloured Beads**

  Make necklaces, sort them into pots, make patterns or shake them in a tin.
  But **never** let your child play with them unsupervised.

- **Stacking Toys and Nesting Barrels**

  Match them and count them. Build towers taking it in turns to do so. Toy bricks can be used in the same way.
  Hide things under the nesting barrels or fill them with water and float them during bath time. Use very simple language such as 'Full.......Empty'.

Activities to encourage imitation

Imitation is important for improving observation, developing co-operation and communication skills. However, some children with ASD may not enjoy activities that encourage imitation and if this is the case, then it is important that you do not insist. Activities can include:

- **Copying Actions**

Encourage the child to copy your actions- clap hands, wave hands, touch your nose or stamp your feet. Alternatively, it is also a good idea for you to imitate his/her actions.

Use musical instruments and shakers to imitate one another or respond to any verbal sounds your child makes echoing those sounds.

Sing or play action songs such as 'the wheels on the bus', 'if you're happy and you know it' etc to encourage imitation.

- **Toy Bricks**

Set out some bricks over the floor. Copy what the child does- if they build, build the same. If they bang bricks together or twiddle with them, you do the same. Make sure your child sees that you are doing the same – call out his/her name to attract attention. Other toys such as stacking rings can be used in the same way.

Activities to encourage turn taking

Communication involves us in turn taking. Individuals with an ASD tell us that they find turn taking in conversation very difficult. They find it hard to know when to answer/ join in or when to stop talking and give the other person a chance to speak. Perhaps this is why they are often more at ease using e-mail or texts where the turn taking in the communication is far more obvious.

A number of toys and activities can be used to help young children with ASD understand the notion of taking turns in the communication process. Balls, bean bags, skittles, posting boxes, bricks, stacking toys, pop up toys, 'lift the flap books', puppets and wind up toys (sent back and forth) can all be used to develop this understanding.

According to Val Cumine and her colleagues (2000, pp. 60-61) in order to give young children, the best opportunities to develop skills in communication, language and literacy, practitioners will need pay attention to:

» Helping the child to understand what communication is;

» Giving the child a range of verbal and non-verbal strategies to communicate

» Helping the child to understand the verbal and non verbal communication of others

» Giving the child opportunities to link language with physical movement in action songs and rhymes

» Giving opportunities to link language (spoken and written) with real life experiences

» Helping the child to develop communication skills in social situations.

They advise practitioners to do the following:

» Use toys that grab attention and are linked to a child's interest

» Organise one to one sessions or small groups for singing (action songs) and short stories

» Exaggerate facial expressions and gestures

> » Teach pointing

> » Create situations which could prompt the child into using language communicatively, e.g. 'forgetting' to give him a straw in a juice carton

> » Place themselves between the child and object he wants, encouraging him/her to prompt you to reach for the thing that he needs

» Use visual or musical cues to supplement verbal instruction e.g. playing a particular piece of music to signal it is time to have drink.

> » In literacy, it is important to be aware that the child might decode words well but have little understanding of their meaning.

Using Information Communication Technology to Facilitate Communication

ICT, Information Communication Technology, is a term used to describe a range of personal computer (PC) devices that are designed for communication. Typically these are desktop computers, interactive whiteboards, tablet PCs, and other mobile devices.

For children with ASD, the computer can provide a safe exploratory space for creativity and imagination where, when the appropriate level of structure and guidance is provided, they will find they can interact at their own pace without fear of failure. The universal appeal of computers can assist in the inclusion of the most anxious child because computers offer a predictable and controllable medium where communication can occur without the multi-sensory inputs of the real world. In particular, computers have been shown to assist communication by providing a routine for turn taking and waiting which in the course of face-to-face interactions would be governed by understanding the intentions of others through language and gesture. For children with ASD this represents a significant benefit, as the many layers of interpretation required in face-to-face communication are a continuous cause of confusion and anxiety.

Children with ASD often have difficulties in interacting with others and can become anxious in school and social situations. Sometimes this can lead to challenging behaviour. With guidance, computers could be used as a tool to demonstrate to children how they can interact with others without the need for conventional communicative behaviours, such as eye contact and language. By watching another person, adult or child, play and experiment, it is possible to encourage imitating and turn taking. Working alongside another person or peer is the first step to interaction and tolerance of another person in their 'space'.

The kinds of activities with a computer that encourage repetition and imitation are a good starting point for reducing anxiety. This may result in increased opportunities for shared communication and imaginative play. Many children with ASD will also enjoy activities with ICT that provide them with feedback and reward. This will draw their attention and can ultimately increase their confidence and self-esteem, which we know can also motivate the desire to share with others. Successive exploration within an ICT environment can therefore lead to the development of communication, as children are able to understand that their actions have a consequence. When the technology is set up so that other children can observe and join in, this can lead to a desire to share with others.

Enabling children to explore an ICT environment and to find out how to choose different options can encourage independence, as a way to introduce collaboration, more experienced users can demonstrate certain activities to others. This 'scaffolding' is considered to be an essential component of learning and one that has been adopted by many practitioners in this area.

Nevertheless, it is important to remain mindful that the intense focus that the computer affords could actually accentuate 'tunnelled' thinking. We know that many children with ASD disengage from the learning process or focus on a restrictive set of skills or interest that they have chosen for themselves. This can be very frustrating for those working with the child as we seek to realign their interests and encourage our children to become active participants in our society. Many parents have experienced their child being 'locked' into a favourite computer game and teachers have reported difficulty with not being able to engage children in other activities whilst the computer dominates their experience. Some concerns have been expressed by some researchers that very young children will be restricted in their development if they are not offered the opportunity to make and explore using all their senses and given plenty of freedom to choose. ICT use that adopts a heavily directed approach with explicit rules and highly organised structures can result in a child learning a routine rather than engaging in the joyful interaction that can occurs when opportunities for discovery, surprise and curiosity are made available.

Therefore, it is important to remember that the role of the supporting adult goes beyond that of instructor – it is important to create pauses in an ICT activity and to find ways to join in the child's zone of interest.

Some further activities for developing communication

Colourful objects

There are a number of toys now available that light up or make sounds just like the ones pictured here. They can be used to attract attention and encourage interaction. Sometimes, children have a favourite toy that sparkles or lights up and these can be used as a reward. For example, encourage a child to point to to an object that he/she really likes and if he/she does point, hand the object over for some play time. Children with ASD need to be motivated to communicate.

Visual timetables

Often children with an ASD are visual learners. Simple visual timetables like the ones in the pictures help to show the child what is going to happen during the day. When an activity is complete, the child can remove the relevant picture and know that he/she is ready to move onto the next activity. Children with ASD do not like change and so a timetable of this nature is important because it can take away the fear of the unknown.

References

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