autism
education trust

Do you have a child with autism in your class?

A guide for teachers

Do you have a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in your class?

We are sure you will be wondering where to start. The first port of call is to learn about the disability and how it may affect all the children in your class. Secondly, a useful route to follow is to learn strategies which will support the child throughout their school life and allow them to reach their full potential.

What is an autism spectrum disorder?

An ASD is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to the people and world around them.

The term spectrum is used as, although people with an ASD will share three main areas of difficulty, the condition will affect them in differing ways. No one child you work with will be the same as another and therefore, the support strategies you put into place will vary from child to child.

The three main areas of difficulty are known as the triad of impairments and are defined below:

Social interaction difficulties mean a child with an ASD may find it difficult to understand unwritten social rules, other people's emotions and feelings and expressing their own emotions. Their interactions with their peers may appear over-formal, egocentric or "strange" and as a result they may find it hard to form friendships, preferring to spend time alone.

Social communication difficulties cover both verbal and non-verbal language. Children on the autism spectrum may have a very literal understanding of language and can be slow to process language. They may have difficulties in using and understanding tone and pitch as well as jokes and sarcasm. Some children may not speak or have limited speech while others will have good language skills but may still struggle with turn taking in conversation. In terms of non verbal language, children may have difficulties in understanding facial expressions, body language and eye contact.

Social imagination difficulties can make it hard for a child on the autism spectrum to understand and predict another person's behaviour and imagine situations outside of their own routine. This may make it difficult for a child to plan ahead and organise themselves and to cope with new and unfamiliar situations. This can also be accompanied by a range of repetitive activities.

It is also important to note, that children on the autism spectrum may experience some form of sensory sensitivity. Children may be over- or under-sensitive to certain sensory stimulation (sights, sounds, smells etc) which can make the hustle and bustle of school life a frightening or even painful experience.

Develop strategies tailored to individual children

In order to work effectively with people on the autism spectrum, the National Autistic Society has developed a framework called SPELL, to assist professionals in understanding and responding to the needs of individuals with an ASD. Working within each area of the framework will enable you to build fantastic support programmes for the children you work with who are on the autism spectrum.

Here we consider each of the areas of the SPELL framework and suggest ways you can use them in your classroom.

Structure:

- Introducing **timetables** will help the child to predict what's happening next, and to tell them about any changes to the usual routine. Use **timers** to clearly label how long an activity will last.

- Ensure all planned activities are achievable. Explain tasks in **small manageable chunks** with a clear start and end point.

- Use **visual cues** (symbols and pictures) to support a child's understanding of an activity.

- Provide structure in **unstructured times**, for example, offer choice boards and structured games at lunch time and playtime. Limit choices, making them clear to avoid any confusion.

- Structure your **communication**. Use the child's name first to obtain their attention before giving an instruction and allow the child time to process this before moving onto the next. Use **language** that is clear, precise and concrete.

- **Colour code work sets**, for example, colour all science books blue and label all science equipment with a blue sticker to enable the child to organise themselves more independently.

Positive:

- Ensure **expectations are realistic** and individual to the child. All work given must be achievable to ensure continued motivation and success.

- Use **reward strategies** and **motivators** to ensure appropriate behaviour is continued. Use a low arousal (dead pan) response when dealing with inappropriate behaviours.

- Maintain **consistency** when dealing with challenging behaviour through the use of behaviour support plans. Provide **positive alternatives** to behaviour, for example, allow the child to use a time out when he/she becomes anxious in class.

- Identify and use a pupil's **strengths** or **special interests** when planning activities.

- Build **self esteem** by creating opportunities for pupils to develop independence, have responsibility and make a contribution to a group.

Empathy:

- Develop a **pupil profile** to increase staff understanding of an individual child. Include triggers to behaviour, phobias, motivators and anxieties. Include a **sensory profile** to understand which stimuli are highly sensitive. Share this information with all school staff likely to come into contact with that child, including lunchtime assistants and school caretakers, to try to avoid situations which may lead to distress.

- **Educate** staff and peers through training and strategies such as "circle of friends".

- Offer **practical help** for problem areas such as social scripts and understanding social rules.

- See **behaviour** as a means of communication – what is he/she trying to tell me?

- Ensure **actual comprehension** has been achieved –understanding may be masked by learned phrases or echolalia. Use communication strategies such as visual supports and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to assist this.

Low Arousal:

- Check **environment** for potential distractions specific to the individual (flickering lights, strong smells, noises)

- Create a **workstation** or space free from distractions for work tasks or learning new or complex skills.

- **Filter out** irrelevant stimuli, for example, unnecessary illustrations on worksheets.

- Use **resources** to address individual needs (ear defenders to block out sounds when working, tangle toys, weighted blankets etc)

Links:

- Ensure **parents** are involved throughout the process to help monitor progress and review targets. Share information through home school books and draw up behaviour support plans together. These can then be used consistently across home and school.

- See the child themselves as a **partner** in the education process and consult with them and their parents on developments.

- Ensure all **staff** are informed of support strategies and current issues.

- **Share** information with other professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Educational Psychologists and so on.

Following this framework will help you to reduce the anxiety the child may be experiencing and will enable the child to work more effectively in a welcoming and 'safe' environment.

Find out more

For more information about SPELL and the NAS Education Support Service visit The National Autistic Society website at www.autism.org.uk

For more information about The Autism Education Trust and its resources for professionals visit www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk or email info@autismeducationtrust.org.uk

autism education trust

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk