

Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder have difficulty accessing and participating in the classroom curriculum. Their inability to access the curriculum may manifest itself in behavioural issues. These inappropriate behaviours are often seen in a negative light and have been interpreted as either not serving a useful purpose or that the student is being lazy, manipulative or deliberately disruptive. In fact the student's behaviour may be a genuine reflection of the disability, their inability to respond differently.

Many behaviours start from small issues and quickly build in intensity. It is important to address the beginning of the behaviour to teach skills so the student has a different way of managing situations that are difficult for him/her.

The following are some of the common issues faced by students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, the possible reasons behind their behavioural response and some approaches to try.

Communication

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders may have difficulties with verbal and nonverbal communication both expressively and receptively.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- verbal output ranging from little or no language to lengthy monologues
- unusual language usage e.g. echolalia, speaking with accents, pedantic, idiosyncratic speech
- repetitive questioning e.g. Anxiety, likes sound of, likes reaction of others
- peculiar volume of speech
- inability to ask for help
- poor conversation skills
- poor eye contact e.g. avoidance (person, task), stare or look through
- poor attending skills
- inability of following group instruction
- lack of or poor choice making skills
- literal interpretation of what is said
- lack of understanding of humour/sarcasm/metaphors/inferences
- lack of, limited or exaggerated use of gestures
- lack of perception and/or understanding of body language/facial expressions of others
- lack of response to questions, both verbal and written
- read factual books rather than fiction
- poor receptive language, verbal and/or written
- lack of ability in following lengthy/complex verbal instructions
- lack of ability in following a sequence, simple or complex

Things to try:

- know student's means of communication e.g. verbal, pictures, symbols, communication device
- know student's level of expressive and receptive language: have an assessment if needed
- know meaning behind student's idiosyncratic language
- use simple precise language

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- use visuals
 - WAIT and allow time for processing of information and to give a response
 - encourage eye contact do not demand
 - know student's level of questioning: have an assessment if needed
 - sit student at the front of the group
 - repeat/rephrase instructions
 - provide individual instructions e.g. verbally, written
 - structure obsessive talk: provide a designated time, place
 - conversation skills may need to be taught
 - gain attention: get onto level of student, prepare student verbally e.g. name, 'look', 'listen', 'this is important'
 - skill student and provide student with a means of asking for help or expressing confusion
 - avoid metaphors, sarcasm

Social Interaction

Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder have difficulty with social interaction. Current research suggests that the social impairment in Autism Spectrum Disorder is perhaps one of the major deficits which has an impact right across their lives.

Difficulties that may be displayed

- appear egocentric in nature: lack sensitivity to others
- are naive
- lack an awareness of their own and others emotions
- lack empathy with other people
- difficulty understanding social issues
- do not understand the effect of their behaviour has upon others
- over sensitive to criticism
- paranoid or suspicious of others
- susceptible to harassment
- has an exaggerated sense of justice
- does not initiate social interaction, does not know how to go about it, or is afraid of making a mistake

Things to try:

- slowly build up tolerance to having other people close
- teach rules and social interaction: present a social skills program
- teach different ways to interact in a social situation
- provide clear expectations
- teach turn taking/sharing
- role model social situation
- use video, photographs of sequences to examine social interaction
- use social stories
- teach flexibility/cooperation
- give guidance on how to cope with harassment and bullying
- help student monitor own social behaviour

Sensory Processing

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders may experience sensory processing problems. Responses can either present as an under reaction or an over reaction to sensory stimuli. Responses can vary from day to day or throughout a day.

Difficulties that may be displayed

- negative responses will vary e.g. running away, covering ears, pulling jumper over head, pulling at or taking clothes off, crying, being frightened, pushing people away
- positive responses will vary e.g. seeking out or running to, smile, laugh, happy, relaxed
- distracted by the sensory stimuli which he/she likes or dislikes
- become upset when removed from an enjoyable sensory experience
- reluctance or refusal to enter or pass through an area/doorway/building
- refusal of particular foods or drinks e.g. push or throw away
- reluctance or refusal of messy/goose activities
- does not respond to or indicate an injury: may have a high pain threshold
- will not accept first aid to injury e.g. refuses ice pack
- over reacts to minor scrape, bump

Things to try:

- be aware of pain threshold
- in consultation with parents/caregiver establish an acceptable response to injuries
- be aware of what sensory stimuli affect the student negatively and positively
- be aware of the student's usual response to particular sensory stimuli
- use a positive stimuli as a reinforcer and provide sensory activities as part of the overall program
- if possible, alter the environment e.g. remove sensory stimuli, bring in sensory stimuli
- be aware of placement of student's tray, drawer, locker e.g. assign a locker which is on the end instead of in the middle
- be aware of placement of student's desk e.g. away from congested area, turned away from window so he/she is not watching the leaves move
- allow movement via another pathway
- schools need to be flexible with dress code e.g. allowed to wear school tracksuit instead of shirt, tie, woollen jumper
- take into consideration the difficulties of the student when scheduling activities e.g. postpone outside sport if the lawns are being mowed if the sound of a mower is a negative or a positive stimuli for the student
- make use of social stories
- provide visual cue cards
- provide equipment that can be used e.g. ear plugs, walkman, disc o sit, t-stool
- skill the student as to what he/she can do e.g. get a tissue and wipe paint off handle of brush
- provide sensory input

Organisational Skills

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders often experience problems with being organised. This may present itself in a variety of ways.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- messy trays/drawers/desk/locker
- work spread out over wide area

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- takes a long time to get started with designated work. The student gets distracted on way to their tray, forgets what he/she has to get, cannot find what is needed for the lesson
 - loosing track of necessary equipment e.g. pencil, rubber
 - not having required books and materials for lesson
 - having loose worksheets instead of being in designated place e.g. pasted in workbook
 - inability to organise time for completion of assignments
 - not knowing what to bring to school on a given day
 - not knowing what to take home from school
 - leaving behind or throwing away school notices and or newsletter
 - things written into diary/workbook in a non sequential manner
 - answers/responses not put in correct place
 - written work may be started anywhere on the page

Things to try:

- have a clean out of tray/drawer/locker on a regular basis
- allow more space for the student to work in
- provide simple clear instruction and avoid lengthy sequence
- put name on pencils and other equipment, have a plentiful supply of pencils, use a pencil case with holes for placement within a ringed folder
- place a visual schedule of equipment needed for a particular subject inside corresponding workbook/folder
- use a ringed folder with divider pages, or plastic sleeves for designated subjects so do not have to keep track of so many books
- place tray near student or attach a bag for books to student's desk
- colour code folders, workbooks, worksheets
- provide student with a map which has classroom colour coded to corresponding subject
- to keep things consecutively fold back tip of page or number pages consecutively
- indicate with a symbol the start and finish of a page/line
- provide home with a time schedule
- provide home with a brief explanation of what the homework is about
- provide an alternative way to get information, notices, newsletter home to parents e.g. mother picks up notices on specific day when she picks up her son/daughter
- schedule a time for the student to record in his/her diary
- schedule a time to check diary

Resistance To Change/Rituals/Routines

Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder often experience problems with change. Change can lead to confusion and anxiety as it interferes with the student's ability to predict what is or should be happening. It is through such predicability that they make sense of the environment in which they live. Thus they want things to remain the same or create their own rituals or routines in an attempt to control what will happen. It is a means of influencing or controlling their environment.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- becomes upset when an activity is interrupted and may start over from the beginning because they cannot stop part way through and needs to finish
- becomes upset when activity finishes
- refuses to stop activity when directed to do so
- upset or becomes anxious when there is a change in routine
- behaves poorly for a relief teacher

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- wearing of inappropriate seasonal clothing because they are resistant to change from winter clothes to summer clothes and vice versa
 - things needing to be presented or done in a certain way e.g. on school camp bedtime routine

Things to try:

- be aware of difficulties with change and student's reaction to it
- be aware of what works best for the student in preparing for change
- be aware of student's rituals and routines and accommodate if possible and appropriate
- have a means of conveying to relief staff the student's difficulties, rituals and routines and what is used with the student in preparing for change
- use visual schedules, timetables, calendars
- use social stories
- provide family with a time table
- engage in small changes rather than big changes when introducing change to the student
- provide adequate time for transition
- use video, photographs of things that will change e.g. school, class, teacher
- provide student with a map of the school
- teach relaxation

Restricted Interests/Obsessions

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders often display obsessional interests. Students may play, talk, write, read, draw about a particular topic. With some students this particular area of interest may change over time.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- wants to play with a toy all the time: may be distracted by it and will not concentrate on task at hand; become upset when cannot have it
- difficulty sharing a particular toy and becomes upset when another child is playing with the toy; will only play with that particular toy and not a similar one
- it is hard to keep the student focused as he/she will revert back to his/her interest
- may collect things e.g. pieces of fluff, gum nuts, insects

Things to try:

- if appropriate, use a reinforcer
- allow as a means of relaxation
- use it so the student can access the curriculum e.g. counting dinosaurs for math, as a research topic
- visual schedule with interest time factored in
- designate time and place for engagement
- teach conversational skills e.g. reading signs of boredom in listener

Repetitive Behaviours

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders may engage in repetitive movements involving self and/or objects. Students often engage in these activities because they find them comforting and can tune out or escape through them. The activities also lend themselves to a form of relaxation for the student. The repetitive behaviour may change over time, as the student adds to or develops a different behaviour to satisfy his/her needs. The student will often revert to an old behaviour in times of stress or anxiety. The approach to these repetitive behaviours needs to be one of control rather than elimination unless it is or becomes a safety or socially unacceptable issue.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- repetitive body movements e.g. rocking, finger movements, flapping hands, pacing
- repetitive movement of an object e.g. flicking paper, spinning a wheel

Things to try:

- control participation time by designating a time frame stating when and for how long
- if appropriate and feasible use as a reinforcer, e.g. after 10 minutes of work, time to rock/flick/pace, for 2 minutes
- designate acceptable objects e.g. box of flickers
- designate a particular area e.g. area for pacing

Motivation

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders may present the extremes in motivation. Either they are keen and eager or are completely disinterested. Generally they are not motivated socially (to please) and future/long term incentives are meaningless.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- school refusal: not interested in school and does not see the sense of it
- work refusal: does not see the sense of doing the task; knows he is not good at it
- selective work out put: only does a certain task or a particular aspect of a task

Things to try:

- know what motivates him/her
- alter expectations: do not expect too much too soon and gradually build up participation
- work contract: visually sets out expectations and reinforcement
- individualise program as some lessons can seem irrelevant and create anxiety e.g. foreign language. Investigate whether something else could be programmed during this particular time.

Gross and Fine Motor Skills/Motor Planning

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders vary in their motor abilities. Some are very proficient while others experience difficulties.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- poor motor planning skills e.g. does not know where to put his hands or feet
- climbs on, over, under things e.g. climbs out of fenced in play area
- presents as clumsy/awkward
- poor gross motor skills
- avoids physical activities e.g. refusal to participate in PE lesson or fitness class, runs off
- poor fine motor skills
- immature grasp of implements e.g. pencil, brush
- poor writing skills e.g. incorrect letter formation, slow or large writing, not writing on the line
- refusal to write
- does not start work

Things to try:

- assessment of motor skills --- gross, fine, motor planning
- involvement in a school coordination program e.g. fun and games
- provide participation in activities to develop gross and fine motor skills or to extend skills
- provide appropriate sized pencils, pencil grip

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- review the move to link script writing as they may need to remain with regular writing
 - alter expectations of writing lesson/written assignments e.g. set out less work, enlarge work, allow more time
 - provide alternatives for presenting work e.g. write two sentences and verbalise the rest to the teacher or into tape recorder
 - allow alternative participation in physical education lessons e.g. being in charge of equipment, being scorekeeper
 - plan an alternative lesson during scheduled physical education lesson
 - provide a prompt for starting work

Anxiety

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders are often functioning within the school environment with some level of anxiety. Its impact upon the student and how it presents itself will vary.

Difficulties that may be displayed:

- indicators of anxiety e.g. raised voice, finger movements, body language
- poor concentration
- behavioural issues e.g. aggression
- removes self from stressful situation e.g. runs out of class, engages in self stimulatory behaviour
- old behaviours remerge
- ability to express self reduces
- problems with social interactions
- sensory processing problems heighten e.g. being touched may escalate the situation
- may engage in calming tactics e.g. pacing

Things to try:

- be aware of indicators the student is displaying that things are not ok
- teacher to indicate to student he needs a break
- teach the student to be aware of his own indicators
- teach student to say or provide a means for the student to indicate he needs a break
- provide a structured environment
- lessen expectations when the student is not having a good day and increase calming activities
- teach relaxation
- look at student's communication: does he/she have the ability to ask for help, to indicate he/she does not understand?
- social stories

In summary, there are some general points to remember in helping to make the classroom a successful teaching and learning environment:

- Have a thorough understanding of the disability. It is through this knowledge that a perspective on the issues that may arise can be gained.
- Know your student by gaining as much information as possible about him/her. Access your most valuable source of information, the parent/caregiver. Gather information from colleagues who have worked with the student in the past. Access reports and read them thoroughly.
- Be sure the school has in place a means of communicating relevant information regarding the student to his/her other teachers, teachers who will be doing yard duty, relief teacher.
- Skill the student so he/she is able to respond appropriately.
- Do not be reluctant in seeking assistance.
- As a teacher and as a school be flexible and creative in your approach to a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.