

# Helping Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders to Learn

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# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>About the author</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>About this book</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>How to use this book</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>1 Interpreting Autism as a Triad of Opportunity</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2 The Autism-friendly Professional</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3 Making Sense of Changes and Transitions</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4 Structuring a Meaningful Classroom</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>5 Behaviour: Simplifying the Problem-solving Process</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>6 Frequently Asked Questions</b>	<b>108</b>
<i>Useful websites</i>	<i>123</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>125</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>127</i>

# How to use this book

The content of the book looks at how teachers and teaching assistants can make changes to their own professional skills and knowledge, as well as the classroom environment in terms of timetable information, working systems, clear tasks and curriculum balance as well as contributing towards whole-school support systems in order that each student on the autism spectrum has an effective education programme.

The book considers examples of practice in a variety of school settings and also provides case study examples of children who are functioning at a variety of levels in terms of their cognitive abilities and their degree of autism. The reader can therefore gain a good overall understanding of autism and the issues which arise in teaching and learning across the spectrum, but can also focus and apply sections of the book which are specific to their own professional, student or setting needs.

Each chapter presents subheadings to show the key areas being covered in the chapter. Some of the main sections have interactive exercises within them to help readers consider their own thoughts, or which can be used by Sencos, or others involved in providing professional development, in understanding and teaching children with autism. A brief outline of the chapters is given below.

## **1 Interpreting autism as a triad of opportunity**

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the three key areas of difficulty which define autism, known as the triad of impairment. The chapter looks at the range of responses that children present, so as to provide teachers and teaching assistants with a wider framework for understanding the spectrum. The chapter sets the scene and encourages us to see our role as a dual interpreter, firstly translating autism for colleagues and then interpreting social cues for children on the autism spectrum. It also focuses on understanding each individual child's unique presentation of autism. Readers can use the content of this chapter to consider how, by modifying their own interactions and communication when teaching, they can help children with autism to feel more relaxed and ready to learn. The chapter suggests that professionals interpret the triad of impairment as a triad of opportunity, using an understanding of autism to interact and teach more effectively.

## **2 The autism-friendly professional**

This chapter focuses on the professionals who work with children on the autism spectrum. It looks at how a knowledge of autism, and of individual differences in the presentation of autism, can enable readers to be empathetic and insightful professionals. The chapter considers the expectations professionals have of themselves and those that students and parents may have of them. Readers can use this chapter to reflect on the roles they play in supporting and teaching children on the autism spectrum. The chapter

considers the difficulties, dilemmas and rewards of these roles. The chapter encourages us to evaluate our own development as professionals who understand autism and its implications for teaching and learning. Readers can also use the chapter to reflect on the support mechanisms they may need to decrease their own stress and focus on enabling children on the autism spectrum to learn.

### **3 Making sense of changes and transitions**

Everyone experiences changes occurring in their daily lives on a large or small scale. Consequently we all recognize that ‘changes’ can happen in a number of forms and demand different responses from us.

This chapter considers in depth one particular area of difficulty for children on the autism spectrum, understanding and accepting changes in daily routines and situations. This chapter considers how ‘a change is only a change’ if you recognize it as such and discusses the complexities of individual responses to ‘change’, which can cause real stress for children on the autism spectrum. Strategies are suggested for helping children to perceive change differently, or understand and accept change.

### **4 Structuring a meaningful classroom**

‘Structuring a meaningful classroom’ considers what we mean by structured teaching and how this approach can help to make the classroom make sense. It considers how teachers and teaching assistants can learn most from observing and listening to each individual about what helps him learn. Readers can use this chapter to focus on where and how they can make small adjustments to differentiate learning, clarify expectations and organize the classroom day. Ways of using timetables and working systems can give predictability to students and also be used to teach flexibility and independence.

### **5 Behaviour; simplifying the problem-solving process**

This chapter considers how some children on the autism spectrum communicate their frustrations through their behaviour. It focuses on the ways in which teachers and TAs can support themselves and other colleagues through the problem-solving process and can use simple questions to try and formulate a clear strategy for resolving challenging behaviour. The chapter considers how stress manifests itself through behaviour and how this can affect both pupils on the autism spectrum and those that work with them. The chapter suggests the use of an approach referred to as SPACE (Stress, Prevention, Action, Calming Environments and Extras) as a means of distancing both the pupil and the staff from the challenging behaviour.

## 6 Frequently asked questions

Chapter 6 considers some of the questions often asked by Sencos, teachers and teaching assistants in primary, secondary and special schools. Some are dealt with as generic issues, while other questions are context-specific, with particular reference to primary, secondary and special school settings. They address the needs of children who are experiencing autism at different levels of severity, and with or without additional learning difficulties. Readers can use this chapter to revisit or clarify information, focus on specific areas, or broaden their knowledge and insights by reading the questions, answers and examples which are different from their own.

### How you can interact with the book

The book provides some experiential exercises that can be used to give insights into the difficulties faced by students who are on the spectrum. These experiential exercises in no way suggest that we can truly understand and feel what it is like to be on the autism spectrum. However, some exercises of this nature may help us gain insight into one or two of the areas of difficulty and provide us with renewed empathy.

The book also provides some case studies which demonstrate successful practice along with exercises which ask us to reflect upon our own practice. These exercises aim to help teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) to strengthen their observation, assessment and strategy implementation skills.

In addition, the book provides planning exercises to apply to the classroom or school situation, which may help professionals be as proactive in preventing difficulties arising as they also need to be in reacting to new challenges which a child on the autism spectrum may present.

I strongly believe that children on the autism spectrum learn most effectively from visual information. To illustrate the use of visual tools when teaching children on the autism spectrum a number of visual images, photographs, and diagrams are used in this book to support the text.

The word 'autism' literally means 'self state', which immediately tells us that anyone who has this disability will have difficulty establishing a clear concept of themselves, which in turn leads to a lack of understanding of other people. It makes sense when considering the meaning of autism that relating to others, interacting socially and a whole array of communication and thinking skills which children usually acquire are likely to be different or difficult for children who are diagnosed as on the autism spectrum.

When referring to children on the autism spectrum, this book uses the word 'spectrum' to include the full range of children who have an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). When using phrases such as 'children on the autism spectrum' the book is referring to those with mild, moderate or severe autism, children with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism (HFA) and pupils who have autism with or without learning difficulties or co-occurring difficulties. The terms 'child' and 'pupil' will be used interchangeably as appropriate and the pronoun 'he' has been selected for use rather than 'she' when generally referring to a child purely to provide continuity, ease of reading and reference. Throughout the book there are composite case studies and comments which reflect a wide range of school contexts and experience across the autism spectrum.

# Interpreting Autism as a Triad of Opportunity

People on the autism spectrum have difficulties in three areas, social interaction, communication and flexible and imaginative thinking, referred to by Lorna Wing (1996) as the triad of impairment. There has been a lot of very thorough and helpful information written about the three key areas of difficulty which define autism. This chapter provides an overview of the characteristics of autism and portrays some of the numerous ways in which children on the spectrum present their unique autism profile.

This chapter looks at the following:

- What do we mean by the autism spectrum and the three key areas of difficulty that define autism?
- How do we see individuals with autism behaving across the spectrum?
- How can we create teaching and learning opportunities from our knowledge and understanding of autism?

This chapter explores the three key areas of difficulty for children on the autism spectrum and the range of responses that individual pupils present. The chapter provides professional development activities to enable us to reflect upon our understanding of autism and consider how we can match our teaching approach to each child's unique presentation of autism. The chapter challenges us to think creatively about how we can make the 'triad of impairment' a 'triad of opportunity' by using our knowledge of autism to plan effective teaching and learning opportunities.

To help us understand and empathize with children on the autism spectrum this chapter asks us to reflect on some of our own experiences and behaviours, which sometimes give us insights into how individuals with autism may respond. However, it is important not to trivialize the impact of autism through our own insights into one or two of the behaviours that we can personally identify with. The chapter considers the social interaction skills, communica-

tion skills and the flexible imaginative thinking skills which most of us can access easily without much conscious thought, in an effort to try and appreciate how complicated apparently simple interactions and communications are, if like children on the autism spectrum we do not possess such skills. The chapter also highlights that, in addition to the three specific areas of difficulty, the interrelationship of these areas further complicates the way each person on the spectrum thinks, acts and understands the world around him.

### **What do we mean by autism and the autism spectrum?**

Autism is a communication difficulty, which makes it difficult for children on the autism spectrum to:

- Listen and relate to others.
- Recognize and understand the meaning of facial expressions, gestures, body language and the emotions that they signify.
- Interpret social signals, and understand what others want from you.
- Work out what others are saying.
- Imagine what to do in unfamiliar situations.
- Be clear about fact and fantasy.
- Think about things from the perspective of others.
- Think flexibly and accept changes.

Autism is a neurological developmental disability which, say Mesibov, *et al.* (2004), 'affects the ways that individuals, think, eat, dress, work, spend leisure time, understand their world, communicate, etc'. Mesibov *et al.* (2004) provide a very useful analogy in that autism is seen to some degree to be a 'culture'. Although they recognize that autism is not in actuality a culture, the predictable patterns of thinking and behaviour that people with autism share provide a clear commonality. As autism is a spectrum there are numerous factors which contribute to the uniqueness of each individual with autism. The term 'spectrum' reminds us to respect the individuality of each person with autism. This includes understanding the mild, moderate or severe degree of their autism, recognizing the cognitive abilities of each person with it, and setting this alongside a whole range of other distinct factors including particular skills, interests, age, personality, etc.

Throughout this book, the phrase 'children on the autism spectrum' is used to refer to **all** children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This includes children with Aspergers Syndrome, high functioning autism (HFA), as well as pupils who have autism with or without learning difficulties or co-occurring difficulties, at varying degrees from mild to severe.