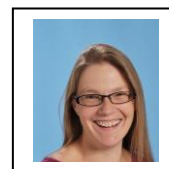


# Social Communication and Autism – Frequently Asked Questions

Bryony Landsbert (Educational Psychologist)

February 2021



## What is autism?

The National Autistic Society describes autism as a “lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world”. Their website explains that autism is a spectrum condition. This means that it affects people in different ways - Everyone has their own strengths and challenges. Everyone is different, and everyone on the autism spectrum is different to each other too.

There are key challenges/difficulties that within the criteria for a diagnosis of autism.

- social interaction – people with autism have difficulty reading and understanding others’ feelings and intentions, and might also find it hard to identify and expressing their own feelings. Whilst some avoid being with others, some like being with people but might not quite understand how people are interacting with each other and appear to respond strangely or unintentionally rudely.
- social communication – Some people with autism have excellent language skills whilst others don’t talk at all. Some people on the autism spectrum have difficulties with verbal communication i.e. using and understanding words or sentences. They might take language literally and find it difficult to ask or answer questions. Most people with autism have difficulties with using and understanding non-verbal communication such as the way words are said (for example the tone of voice, sarcasm).
- repetitive and restrictive behaviours – People with autism often prefer to have routines which help them manage the world around them (which they might find unpredictable). Again, everyone is different, but they might want to keep things around them the same. Sometimes there are repetitive body movements which might help a person feel calm or happy. Changes in routine can be difficult for people with autism, and they often need preparing for change.

Some people on the Autistic Spectrum, but not all, also experience the following. Many of these are more apparent where the person is experiencing greater difficulties in understanding and managing the world around them.

- over or under sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch
- particular focus on interest or hobbies
- extreme anxiety, ‘shutdowns’ and ‘meltdowns’

There are lots of other reasons why people have difficulties with all these things, and so if your child has some of these difficulties it does not necessarily mean they are autistic.

There are different terms used when discussing autism. Some people call it ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition), or the now less common ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Aspergers is often used to describe children who are doing well academically but who struggle with social communication and other aspects of autism.

## How do we assess whether a child has autism?

Autism can only be diagnosed by specific medically trained professionals. Via the NHS this can be achieved;

- for school age children - usually through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
- for pre-school children - usually via the Paediatrician.

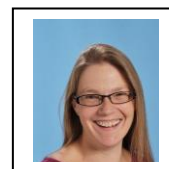
Although education professionals cannot diagnose, they can work effectively to help identify gaps in the above skills and plan to develop these skills. In Didcot, we use a staged approach when assessing social communication needs, involving a ‘review, plan, do’ cycle. This should always start with the class teacher’s routine monitoring of the progress of all the children in their class. If a child is struggling socially or academically in school, the class teacher will liaise with the school’s SENCO. The majority of SENCOs in the partnership are either very experienced or have a Masters Degree in Special Educational Needs and have studied assessment processes.

Either school staff or your GP can support you by referring your child to CAMHS or the Paediatrician, though it is always helpful for GPs to have a good amount of information about how the child is getting on in school. It is not currently possible for parents to ‘self refer’ their child in Oxfordshire.

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Sadly, there are currently very long waiting lists via both NHS routes (typically between 1 and 2 ½ years). This means that it is very probable that your child's school will already have started thinking about how to support your child's needs before they receive a diagnosis. A child does not need a diagnosis of autism in order to receive the additional support they need within a mainstream school, but sometimes a diagnosis can help clarify the child's needs and might enable access to support outside of school. If the child is managing well in school, a new diagnosis of autism may not mean that any additional support is required.

When you get a diagnosis from CAMHS, they will write to you and include a list of places you can get support. You will need to contact these people yourselves, but school staff may help you prioritise who to call. The CAMHS list may include the following organisations.

- Autism Family Support Oxfordshire – [www.afso.org.uk](http://www.afso.org.uk)
- Autism Oxford - [www.autismoxford.org.uk](http://www.autismoxford.org.uk)
- National Autistic Society - <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/post-diagnosis-support/parents-and-carers>

## **Does having autism mean there's something wrong with my child? How can I help them understand it and teach them to manage the world?**

As we've already noted, we are all unique as individuals. We all have different talents and needs. As each child grows, they learn about themselves and what they find easy and hard, and what helps them do their best. This is no different for a child who struggles with social communication. It's not that there's something 'wrong' with them, there's something they will probably need more support in learning to manage.

Sometimes when a child learns that they are 'autistic' this actually hinders their progress as they think it means they can't learn to interact well with other people. When explaining autism and social communication needs to children, we like to help them understand that we are all different, and that this means that we learn in different ways. If they are struggling to learn something the way the teacher is currently teaching it, we will find a different way of teaching until they do learn. For this reason, increasingly teachers like to talk about 'learning differences' rather than learning difficulties.

It is especially important for adults both at home and at school to explain to children with autism how to behave and react to the world around them. When they 'get it wrong' we need to explain to them how they should behave and why. You can help them by doing the following. These strategies are the same for people with autism however old they are.

- use words and phrases you know your child understands. If in doubt keep the language simple.
- acting like a 'tour guide' in unfamiliar situations – telling them where things are, when things happen, what do say and do etc. Give them opportunities to ask questions.
- before they go into situations they find difficult, remind them what they should do when.
- possibly decide on a few key things to work on at a time – start by thinking of small and manageable things that will make a big difference to you and your child.
- if it 'goes wrong', remain calm, help your child be calm, and when they are calm too, explain what happened and why, and importantly what they should do next time (if necessary together practise doing the 'right' way)

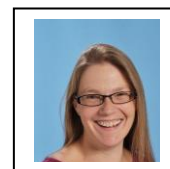
## **What kind of help should my child have at school if they have social communication needs or a diagnosis of autism?**

Just as there are differences in how well the general population of children do at school, there are differences with how well children with autism do. Some children with autism find school much easier than others. For some the familiar and predictable rules and routines within school are enough to enable them to cope, whilst

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others will require some level of adaptation and support. Some, particularly girls, manage to mask their difficulties whilst they are in social situations and so the extent of their difficulties is not always apparent in school.

The vast majority of children with autism attend mainstream schools, and like some of the rest of the population some achieve very well and progress to university. A minority of children with autism attend specialist schools, either for children with learning difficulties or, where they can manage the mainstream curriculum but not the environment, specialist schools for children with autism.

All teachers

- are responsible for differentiating work for the children in their class, and this means adapting it to their needs, so that they can do it as independently as possible
- should know which strategies which the young person has been taught and support the child in using these in class if they need help (they may not need help).

If your child is struggling, together the key teachers and SENCo will,

1. discuss with parents/carers
  - what they are worried about, and what improvement they hope they will see in their child as a result of support
  - factors which might affect progress, including routines at home, levels of confidence
2. look at the Oxfordshire Special Educational Needs descriptors. For children with the needs we are discussing here, this is usually the Communication and Interaction Section. (These descriptors are the same in all publicly funded schools in Oxfordshire)
3. consider completing further assessments around social, emotional and language skills to unpick where exactly the child is having difficulties, and ideally also where their strengths lie, so that teachers can use these within their support in school.
4. consider strategies the child and teacher can use in school to support progress
5. consider any intervention packages (one to one or small group work) which focusses on developing particular skills.
6. Review the effectiveness of the support in place at regular review points and adapt provision for the child, reporting back to parents

Parents should ask for a clear picture of the level of support that their child is receiving in school and should have access to assessment results if they wish to see them.

## Can my child have one to one support to help them?

Parents often imagine that the answer to helping children progress is to give them one to one support. Compared with when parents when to school, teachers are generally now much more used to adapting their teaching to meet the needs of learners with lots of different needs.

Whilst quite a few children have a bit of additional support during their school day, there are very few children indeed that require one to one support. The focus of interventions, either on a one to one basis, or in small groups, in or out of the classroom, is to teach the children skills that they can then use independently within the classroom, and then on into adulthood.

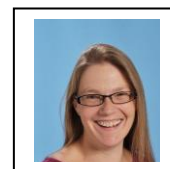
## When does the School's Educational Psychologist (EP) get involved?

Schools will ask me to become involved if, when they have tried what is typically available in their school, the child is still not making sufficient progress, or if they would like further support in unpicking what the child is struggling with.

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There is an expectation that the school will have completed the steps above before inviting me to talk about a child. Parents should also be aware that there is sadly not a limitless supply of my time, and that schools have to carefully prioritise how they use my time. Medical professionals and websites will often suggest an EP, but unfortunately do not always understand the level of support many schools can provide without an EP, nor other pressures on EP time. Schools are in charge of prioritising the EP time that they have, whilst they work hard to meet the needs of all the learners in school.

When I visit a child I usually talk to the parents, teacher, observe in class and work with the child. I usually complete just one piece of work, though if concerns about progress remain I may be involved again.

## If I'm waiting for a diagnosis, where can I get help with managing my child at home?

**School staff** may be able to advise you on which strategies work within school, and help you understand how to adapt these to the school environment. The amount of information and advice available online can be overwhelming, and it can be difficult to know where to start. School staff may be able to help you prioritise where to go first.

**Oxford Health NHS CAMHS** - [www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs.oxon/service/ndc/](http://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs.oxon/service/ndc/) -

- their website has a section on autism (ASD), with some advice and strategies. <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs/advice/asd/>
- If a referral has already been sent to CAMHS and your child is at risk of harming themselves or others, has extreme low mood or anxiety, or is at risk of Permanent Exclusion, you can phone the Neuro-Developmental Conditions (NDC) Pathway Duty Line. They will respond to calls on a Tuesday or a Thursday. They will not respond to calls about waiting times, or about situations where the child is not at immediate risk of harm.

## Are there any good websites I can look at?

The following websites have been recommended by some of our Didcot SENCOs and provide advice and strategies for children with autism and social communication needs.

- The National Autistic Society website has advice, tools and tips on each area underlined within the 'what is autism?' section above. [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk), including visual supports <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/visual-supports>
- <http://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/>
- [www.communication4all.co.uk](http://www.communication4all.co.uk)
- For communication friendly environments - <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/communicationfriendlyenvironments/>
- Oxfordshire County Councils' Local Offer website – which lists a range of local services <https://fisd.oxfordshire.gov.uk/kb5/oxfordshire/directory/results.page?qt=autism&term=&sorttype=relevance>
- <https://resourcesforautism.org.uk/>
- [www.schudio.com](http://www.schudio.com)
- <https://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk/>
- [www.twinkl.co.uk/teaching-wiki/autism](http://www.twinkl.co.uk/teaching-wiki/autism)
- <https://witherslackgroup.co.uk/resources/>