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Welsh Assembly Government

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# Autistic Spectrum Disorders

A Guide for Practitioners Working in  
Secondary Schools and Further and Higher  
Education Colleges In Wales

December 2010



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recycled

ISBN 978 0 7504 5970 9

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WAG10-11196

F1141011

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## What Are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are diagnosed when a child or adult has impairments in social interaction and social communication together with impaired social imagination and a narrow repetitive pattern of activities and interests. The term 'autism spectrum disorder' is a broad term that refers to the subgroups known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). These subgroups include Childhood Autism, Asperger syndrome, and other autism spectrum disorders, all of which are defined by the World Health Organisation's international Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders. Research evidence indicates that 1 in 100 individuals have an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in the UK. It is believed that within Wales today there are approximately 27,000 people with an autistic spectrum disorder. Diagnosis involves a comprehensive assessment by an experienced team of clinicians that usually includes a detailed interview with the parent, specific psychological and language assessments and clinical observations. Referral for assessment and diagnosis enables the individual to access the most suitable support and advice and evidence shows that suitable support and early intervention provides the best outcomes for individuals with ASD. It is also important to be aware that ASD is commonly found together with other medical conditions, both physical and mental.

Although population estimates show that Autistic Spectrum Disorders are relatively common, they are under diagnosed in the current population, especially in adulthood. In addition some individuals may have particular signs of ASD without necessarily having the full syndrome of ASD that would result in a diagnosis. It is therefore important to have an awareness of the signs of the disorder as many people coming into contact with individuals with autism may not be aware that this is why they are experiencing difficulties. The content of this package is designed to provide an insight into autistic spectrum disorders for professionals working within Secondary Schools, and in Further Education Colleges

and Universities. This booklet therefore will address issues and topics that are universal to enabling the individual to make the best use of their Secondary and further/higher education.

## Impact of ASD in Education Settings

An understanding of how the Triad of impairments and sensory issues will affect the way a person with ASD perceives their environment is important when establishing classroom routines and delivering the curriculum. It is also important to recognise that having ASD will affect people in different ways and teaching methods and strategies must be based on an individuals' needs.

Here are some general ways in which people with ASD experience the world differently (taken from the Bridge to success programme, adapted from the Early Bird Programme by Rosie Jones and Siârlot Hall from a South Wales special school).

### Sensory differences

- Can be 'hypo' (under) or 'hyper' (over) sensitive.
- Sensory perceptual differences.
- Takes longer to process information.
- Can be monotropic - able to process only one sense at a time.

### Issues with sounds (auditory)

- Distractions e.g buzzing lights, TV, music, other people.
- Auditory defensive.
- May not appear to hear (have tuned into another sound other than your voice).

### Issues with touch

- Flinches/screams when touched, removes clothing,
- Dislike of certain textures.
- Likes to sit in tight corners/under tables.

### Issues with tastes and smells

- Only eats food of certain colours/textures/tastes.
- Resists trying new foods.
- Reacts to different smells.
- PICA - mouthing any object/substance.

### Issues with proprioception/proxemics

- Do not know where their body is in space or how close to be.
- Difficulty sitting in a chair or keeping still.
- Flaps hands/arms.
- Literally 'does not know own strength'.
- Difficulties with dressing/undressing.

### Issues with theory of mind

- Difficulties understanding what other people are thinking and feeling.
- Theory of mind is usually in place by four years of age. Individuals know how to get around their parents and carers by using psychology. Individuals with ASD may use their behaviour instead.

### Memory

- People with ASD may store and recall memories in a different way to other people. They store their memories as discrete events. They can replay each memory exactly, but do not make connections between them, so find it difficult to anticipate events. They remember things that the rest of us have forgotten, but may have missed the point of the event.

## Language levels

- The language level used with an individual needs to reflect their level of understanding. Language needs to be simple, clear and unambiguous.

## Helpful Ideas

- Use explicit choices; the use of visual prompts e.g. symbols and pictures will help with understanding.
- Structured teaching (TEACCH, see Pre school/Primary leaflet for a fuller explanation), uses the physical room layout with explicit areas for different activities.
- A visual timetable where symbols are used to represent tasks/activities. Symbols can also be used to communicate (PECS, see Pre school/Primary leaflet for a fuller explanation). The individual may need tasks cued by visual, verbal or physical prompts.
- Sign language may be involved by the use of 'Makaton' or 'Signalong' sign systems.

## The Importance of working with families and multi-agency collaboration

Regular contact with the family of an individual with ASD will be of mutual benefit. Parents will always know their child best, but staff can offer different perspectives. By working together and offering opportunities for regular dialogue, formally and informally, will enable ideas and strategies to have a stronger continuity and consistency. This improves the chance for success. The views of families will help prioritise learning plans and structure. Home - school books or other formats (e mail/ MSN messenger) will inform a parent/carer of individual's day at school and vice versa. Parent/carers will need to know how and when is an appropriate time to make contact with the school and their child's teacher/support assistant.

## Multi agency collaboration

Individuals with ASD often have a large network of professionals working to support them and their families.

This support can be from:

- Speech and language therapist.
- Occupational therapist.
- Physiotherapist.
- Music therapist.
- Play therapist.

## Referrals to Individual and Adult Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

Specialist/outreach support teams, Social services, Carers/respite, Psychologists (Educational, Clinical) and Adult services may also be a feature of support at various times during school life.

Professionals involved in the care and education of individuals with ASD have a responsibility to communicate and collaborate with each other for the benefit of the individual and always in collaboration with parents/carers.

## Issues around transitions

The change of one set of circumstances or setting to another is called a Transition. The individual with ASD may need a lengthy preparation and planning for transition. This is best done in consultation with the professionals and parents and should take into consideration the individual's needs and likely responses.

The transfer from Primary to Secondary school at the age of 11 will concern most children. Primary schools are generally smaller communities. Secondary schools are on a much larger scale, involving multiple same age groups of pupils who attend lessons given by subject specialists. Support staff, working in the Primary school, do not generally follow the individual into Secondary phase. 'Local' secondary schools are located in areas of large

population and so the individual in a rural area may need to travel several miles on school transport.

Successful transition plans for the individual with ASD will include:

- Ongoing dialogue between staff involved in transition plans from Primary and Secondary, parents and the individual themselves.
- An accurate profile of the individual being shared including their strengths, preferences and friendship group.
- Receiving staff understanding the nature of ASD and the key characteristics of particular individuals.
- A buddy/mentor system by peers available.
- Planning well in advance of the move, with preparation for the individual involving several visits at different times of the day.
- Having a visual record of the new setting, including photographs of key places and people and a chance to practise navigation of the new environment.

### Other transitions

Many individuals with ASD find difficulties with transitions from one activity to another.

### Helpful Ideas

Visual structures such as schedules using Objects of reference, photographs or symbols may alleviate the uncertainty and reassure the individual and help them to understand what is about to happen.

## Secondary School

Social integration is one of the most difficult things for pupils on the Autistic Spectrum to achieve as they move from junior to secondary school and from Year 11 to further/higher education placements. At all stages of transition the aim is to provide pupils with the skills and confidence to enable them to cope with the changes and challenges that they will encounter throughout their adult lives after they have left the formal education system.

## Helpful Ideas

The weekly timetable for the child will be much more complex and involve their navigation of a large environment. Successful transition strategies will help them, and others, find their way around.

For pupils aged 11-14, there can be subject/curriculum flexibility through the school's access/inclusion statement, allowing the use of material from earlier (or later) key stages. For pupils with more complex needs, subjects may be used as contexts for learning and to address individual priorities, such as communication and social skills. Current emphasis is on cross curricular, key skills including communication, personal and social skills and thinking/problem solving. A focus on assessment for learning will provide information to inform future planning.

The curriculum for young people 14-19 should address equality of opportunity and to offer a learning experience that will enable everyone to achieve their potential. An increasing emphasis on transferable Key Skills which engage the pupil in a range of activities in education, training, at work and in everyday life.

## Adolescence

For the young person with ASD adolescence can bring difficulties and stress as they try to comprehend and cope with so many changes. This is another transition in their lives. Often information about body changes and relationships will need repeating through their lives, as they can be 'late bloomers'. Learning about social and sexual issues should therefore be ongoing and not time limited. Sexuality is not static; it evolves throughout life.

At the time when their peers are making social groups and defining their social terms, individuals with ASD can find social acceptance a problem in adolescence when idiosyncratic behaviour is tolerated even less.

## Preparation for Examinations

The Regulatory Authorities (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC), CEA (Ireland) and Awarding Bodies are working to ensure that examinations are as accessible as possible to a wider range of individuals.

### Useful strategies might be:

- Providing a separate examination room for the pupil.
- Requesting extra time.
- Presenting the paper on plain paper and in one colour.
- Ensuring that instructions are clear, explicit and do not contain abstract ideas.
- Prompting the pupil to move on to the next question.
- The use of word processors or scribes when pen control is poor.
- Requesting that the paper has been scrutinized by someone understands ASD.

It is important that teachers work with pupils and their parents to give early consideration to options to be taken at KS4. In addition, schools should make early contact with awarding bodies about possible access arrangements which may be available for examinations.

## Preparation for leaving school

The curriculum at Key Stage 4 and Post 16 should be based upon both present and future needs. For many pupils with ASD, it will be necessary to focus on independent social skills, work-related skills and leisure activities as well as National Curriculum requirements in order to ensure continuity between school and post school life.

There are also a range of vocational qualifications which may be appropriate for some pupils. Other opportunities for wider accreditation such as Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, ASDAN may allow pupils with ASD to gain credit for their specific interests. Credit award schemes such as AQA Units of Accreditation and Open College Network can provide flexibility to accredit wider learning.

Pupils with ASD will need access to careers/work related education, community participation and sporting/leisure and creative opportunities. These opportunities can be presented to suit individual needs, settings, teaching and learning styles. Pupils should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning by setting targets, reviewing progress and recording achievements. Feedback on progress and certification for achievement should be given whenever possible.

It is usual for Year 11 pupils to have a one or two week work experience placement. Young people with ASD are entitled to experience life in a work setting to give them an insight into good work habits and post school aspirations. Work experience placements might also provide the opportunity to pursue a 'special' skill or interest. They have certain strengths that are ideal for the working environment. Love of detail and accuracy helps them to retain their motivation and good performance on repetitive tasks better than most other people. Wasting time to engage in work place chit chat and gossip, or take long coffee breaks will not be for them. They are honest, punctual, reliable and always stick to the rules! In addition, pupils with ASD learn best from real life situations and access to work experience could equip them for life.

A group of teachers who attend Autism Cymru's Secondary School Forum were asked what they consider to be key elements in preparation for employment. They suggested the following:

- Good preparation is crucial.
- Prepare pupils in advance - find out what sort of job they might be interested in.
- Research jobs on the Internet - what do you need to do to carry out certain jobs. (interests, aptitudes, qualifications).
- Look how to prepare - always being honest with the employer offering awareness training for staff if necessary.
- Using visual schedules.
- Teaching interview skills and the social rules of the work place and the language of work.
- Considering what will happen at break and lunch times.
- Identifying a work colleague who might act as a mentor.
- Are there issues around medication?

These points might serve as a useful checklist prior to a work experience placement.

Planning and preparation for employment needs addressing in advance in the classroom as part of the curriculum. Pupils may need encouragement to think positively about what they can realistically achieve and should collate a portfolio of evidence. This personal portfolio can be particularly useful at interview and will emphasise the positives since the young person with ASD is likely not to score highly in terms of communication, speaking and listening skills.

## Case Study

In one Resourced Unit in a North Wales Secondary school preparation for transition begins with a visit to final year Primary (Year 6) pupils who will be joining them in September. Staff and pupils from the unit meet them and get to know them. This happens gradually over the course of the school year. Parents of the new pupils are also invited to come to meet Unit staff. This helps to establish the outline requirements for the child in terms of support and understanding and parents are told that they can contact staff any time and play their part in the transition process.

After these initial meetings, parents may bring their child for a school tour at the end of the day, when all is quiet. Children are encouraged to take photos for a scrapbook, or even make their own film of their new environment. Following on from this the pupil is invited to come along during lesson time and sit and observe the unit in action. These sessions are kept short until the pupil feels comfortable enough to cope without the assistance of their own support worker.

In July, all of pupils are taken on a residential outdoor education course, and prospective new pupils are invited to come along. At this weekend all pupils are encouraged to cope with a different environment and novel experiences. This provides an ideal opportunity for everyone to get to know the newcomers and establishes friendships in good time for September. Away from the pressures and demands of school, bonds can be formed and shared challenges bring the young people together.

For older students in Year 11, transitions to higher and further education is facilitated through attendance at Link courses and visits to open evenings at local sixth form colleges. The Careers Wales Advisor, who is specialised in meeting the needs of young people with disabilities, is a key figure in this preparation and becomes involved in the transition process from Year 9 onwards.

By attending Annual Review meetings, the Career Advisor offers help and guidance to both pupils and their parents.

Past pupils often come to share their experiences of moving on from school to higher education. Younger pupils find these visits very reassuring.

## Transitions to Further education

Like any transition already mentioned preparation and familiarisation will be the key to a successful move on. Many Secondary schools will operate local college links and individuals with ASD may have already experienced some visits/attendance to their local college. However, it is important to stress that going part-time with your school peers and staff will be a different experience from going independently full-time. Parents and professionals can help to support the young person with ASD to help them organise and plan ahead as well as ensuring the necessary personal skills are in place - time keeping, getting up routines, personal hygiene, making choices with free time and how to use social facilities. Having coping strategies at times of stress and a known person to act as a contact will also help.

### Suggestions to help a young person with ASD entering FE college:

- Be prepared to meet the student before the course starts.
- Make your verbal information as explicit as possible and back it up, if necessary with written or visual information for the student to take as a permanent reference.
- Student will need to be clear about what amount of study time (on their own) is recommended for your course.
- Practical support in managing anxiety and stress may be needed.
- Targeted mentoring/coaching may enable to student to manage social demands.

- The student will need explicit information, in advance, on where they can go or who they can see to assist with any issues that may arise.
- The student may prefer Emails or other forms of written contact to face to face meetings.
- It may be useful to look at the sensory load of any study/ learning environment with the student to assess their levels of tolerance and suggest any adaptations.
- Independent study skills will need acquiring (and possibly teaching) if the student does not already possess them.

Access to support services and encouragement to disclose any additional learning requirements apply at FE as well as HE establishments (see next section).

The impact which ASD has on an individual is unique to that person. An individualised transition to college programme may be needed for each student with ASD. There is no 'one size fits all' in terms of finding what works for a person with ASD and so plans and strategies used for previous students on the spectrum may not apply to a current one.

It may not always be possible to spot the student with ASD who is not coping with their transition. Students who appear to take college in their stride may have developed good coping strategies and will not want to appear in need of support. Some students will not disclose their ASD. Sometimes when this is the case, issues will surface at a much later date and may be more tricky to remedy. A phase of transition needs to be arranged with dates for a regular review with a member of staff. That may help pre-empt minor issues turning into major problems over time.

The transition phase may need to have attention to timetable, physical layout of the college and its satellites, work and study habits, social skills needed to relate to staff and other students

as well as structuring individual study periods to manage work deadlines. Some students may need strategies for coping with the sensory load that accompanies their college attendance. Individual tutoring/mentoring could also be a feature of the transition phase.

Taken from ideas in Breakey, C (2006) *The Autism Spectrum and Further education*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

## Applying to University

Applications to the majority of courses in Higher Education Institutions are submitted via UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). Applications are completed online and include a variety of sections which must be completed in full, including personal and educational information, university and course choices, a personal statement and a reference. As a part of this application process, it is vital that students are encouraged to disclose any special education requirements or disabilities: this will not affect their application in any way, but will provide the necessary information to the student support service at the university to be able to put the appropriate level of support in place.

## Accessing Support

Support while at university comes in a variety of forms. Most universities will offer a personal tutor to each student. This is normally an academic member of staff within their home department who can offer support in terms of the academic requirements of the course, as well as pastoral issues.

There is also a central student support service who can organise equipment and/or services to meet the specific needs of the student, including Disability and Dyslexia support, financial support, counselling etc. Students should make any needs/issues

known to these services, as support cannot be offered unless the need or issue is made known to the support service.

### Mentoring

Many universities offer support for students with AS disorders through mentoring or buddying support. To find out more, contact the university or college with questions to find out about the services they offer.

In addition to this, students may be able to find support through a local or national charity, such as Autism Cymru and NAS Cymru.

### Supported Living

Most students make the decision between staying at home for the duration of their studies, or moving into a halls of residence. Both have positives and negatives, and these should be taken into consideration. Staying at home provides a safe and familiar environment where the pressures of fitting into a social group are not so keenly felt, and support is provided by experienced family. Living with people who understand ASD can also be beneficial. Living at the university, on the other hand, can offer a unique experience for students to be a part of the student community. Whatever the student chooses, maintaining low levels of anxiety will be key to helping the student 'fit in' and achieve in all areas of their student life.

### Workload Issues

The workload of a university or college course can be intensive, and students increasingly need to be able to demonstrate independent research and group study skills. Support is available for specific needs such as Dyslexia in the form of equipment, and there may be support for typed-up lecture notes as well. Students should always inform the student support services and make them aware of all requirements so that a solution may be found.

## Assessment

Assessment is completed through a variety of small tests, independent study projects, group work and presentations, field work projects, laboratory work and examinations: the particular balance of these assessment methods depends upon the degree scheme.

## Social & Study Skills

Most universities offer a comprehensive range of support sessions on themes such as 'settling into life at university,' 'building friendships,' 'how to research' and 'getting the most out of your studies.' These sessions offer the vital skills necessary to help students make the most of their university experience.

## Financial Support

Dedicated financial support is available for students with ASD in terms of student loans and maintenance grants. Loans are available to cover the cost of tuition fees, accommodation and living costs and are repayable once a student has entered employment paying above £15,000 a year. Maintenance grants (Assembly Learning Grant in Wales) help to cover living costs such as food, bills etc. Maintenance grants are means-tested and priority is given to students from low-income homes. Disabled Student Allowance is a non-means tested government fund that is awarded to help meet the extra course costs students (including postgraduate students) can incur as a direct result of a disability, specific learning difficulty or mental health condition.

## Student Union

Most Universities have a Student Union that provides a range of services, support and advocacy for students who become a member. They provide its members with professional and confidential advice on, for example, student's rights, finances and welfare, employment, accommodation and even queries students might have about the course they are on or the University where they are studying. The Student Union

also offers a wealth of opportunities for students to meet peers or to try something new by organising events and activities, clubs and societies.

### Health and Wellbeing

Universities will have a Wellbeing Officer, Nurse or even a University Clinic where students can get advice on health and wellbeing issues. These may include accessing a GP or Dentist, referral to Student Counsellor or other health professionals, immunisation, and travel abroad. It is important if students are moving away from home that they register with a local GP and Dentist.

### Case Study

Going to university can be a nervous time for any student. Anxiety about a new course, a new home, new friends and a new lifestyle can be intimidating for any student, but especially for students with ASD, whose anxiety levels are often heightened. It may be a good idea to visit university campuses regularly while applying to familiarise students with the environment of the university. A South Wales University runs the Discovery Summer School, a two-day event aimed at helping young people with ASD experience student life before they begin their course. Pupils engage in a variety of activities with their student mentor buddies, including shopping for food, cooking in student flats, going out for a coffee and organising a social activity. Other universities also offer summer schools or similar opportunities to enable students with ASD to acclimatise to the university environment and discover what student life is like.

## Helpful links and sources of further information:

### Links within Wales:

- All-Wales Autism Resource: a bi-lingual information resource for ASD in Wales and each autumn runs the world on-line autism conference featuring many of the world's leading educators, clinicians, and researchers [www.awares.org](http://www.awares.org)
- The National Autistic Society website contains very useful guidance and advice for teachers and lecturers [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)
- Adam Feinstein, who is a both parent of a young man with autism and is employed in Wales by Autism Cymru, is the author of "A History of Autism, Conversations with the Pioneers" published by Blackwells/Wiley. This includes the most accurate history to date of autism, the way it is currently viewed throughout the world and the approaches being used by governments and those working with people with autism. This book is viewed as a modern 'classic' in the disabilities field.
- Plimley, L. and Bowen, M. (2006) ASDs in the Secondary School, London:Sage Publications
- The Autism Inclusion Toolkit: Training Materials and Facilitator Notes (2008). Authors Maggie Bowen and Lynn Plimley. Published by Sage/PCP.

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