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Supporting the Learner in the Learning or Work Environment

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Sensory differences

- Autistic learners often process sensory information differently – they may be hypo sensitive or hyper sensitive. If hypo sensitive they may display sensory seeking behaviours, or they may not feel pain. If an autistic person is hyper-sensitive, they can be overwhelmed by too much sensory input. This can cause increased anxiety and impaired ability to focus. Sensory input can include noise, visuals, smells, taste, touch, texture and people.

Visual

- For autistic learners who are hypersensitive to light, try to keep the surroundings plain, with pastel coloured display boards and keeping distracting displays to a minimum. This may be difficult when sharing rooms but it would be good practice if Providers could adopt this as a policy.
- Avoid fluorescent lighting. Aim for dimmed or natural lighting with no flickering lights.
- Dim lights where possible, especially when displaying information on screen to ensure there is limited glare on the board.

Sound

- Be aware that learners may be over sensitive to noise; allow learners to wear headphones/noise reducers as needed.
- Reduce and eliminate background noise.
- Provide quiet spaces to work, any noises can appear amplified. Autistic learners can sometimes concentrate more effectively when working alone.

Stimming

- Do not try and prevent learners from engaging in 'stimming' behaviours such as hand flapping and pacing as they rely on these behaviours to self-regulate and avoid going into shut down or meltdown when they are feeling overwhelmed.

Communication

Effective communication is essential in supporting autistic learners. Many of the difficulties and problems experienced by autistic learners are underpinned by poor communication. Increased anxiety may reduce the ability to communicate verbally.

- Ensure you have the learner's attention, say their name before beginning.
- Use a clear, calm voice.
- Ensure that instructional language is explicit and unambiguous. Avoid idioms, metaphors, similes, long questions and explanations.
- Break down instructions and support with visual information or lists.
- Break down tasks to make them easier to understand, even provide a writing framework if necessary.
- Ask specific questions.
- Do not overload the person with lots of verbal information.
- Use facts to explain things, avoid analogies and never use sarcasm.
- Don't rely on body language, gestures and tone of voice.
- A learners' vocabulary is sometimes more advanced than their understanding of words; check that the learner understands what you have asked of them.
- Autistic learners often have auditory processing difficulties so you may need to give them time to process your question, rather than expecting an answer immediately.

Space

- It is useful to have a conversation with the autistic learner regarding where they would like to be seated e.g. where they can easily see the tutor and the board without having to frequently turn around.
- Ensure that learners have enough space around them. Physical proximity can be overwhelming and uncomfortable for some.
- When talking to an autistic learner try not to stand too close or lean over their shoulder.
- Try to sit left and right handed learners so that their writing arms are not adjacent and bumping as they write.
- Try to maintain a tidy and clutter free learning area. Resources should be kept in a set place and clearly labelled.
- Monitor displays. 'Busy' visuals of many colours can be overwhelming and cause distraction to autistic learners.
- Allow movement breaks and opportunities to get up and stretch, sitting in one position can become uncomfortable.
- Think about the physical structure of a learning environment to create a non-distracting area for learning.

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- Be aware of learners' anxiety levels. Have an agreed safe and quiet place for pupils to go to when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli. Pre-arrange that learners can leave the learning area if they are feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
- Allow learners to leave the lesson five minutes earlier so that they can move to their next location before all other learners start moving around the centre. They may find this less distressing.

Supporting the learner with their work

- When carrying out learner reviews, give a brief beforehand so that they can prepare for the meeting. Explain what your role is and the purpose of the meeting beforehand.
- Encourage the learner to sit in a place avoiding visual and sensory distractions, such as noise, bright lights and busy rooms.
- Provide regular mentoring and ask very specific questions rather than rely on the learner to tell you what they are struggling with.
- Autistic learners may rarely offer more information than they have been asked and there could be something essential that you are missing.
- Email learners rather than face to face if it works better.
- Use a variety of teaching styles and use one that suits.
- Make information visual, use pictures to help explain things.
- Print out workshop notes/PowerPoint before the workshop/after the workshop or ensure it is uploaded to an e-learning platform.
- Support the learner in advance of controlled assessments - providing details of the room, its layout.
- Encourage learners to develop visual aids to help understand their timetable. Ensure that learners know which days to bring specialist equipment.
- Reinforce teaching with a podcast, a multi-sensory game.
- Use visual timetables, learners will know what they are doing so that there are no unexpected surprises.
- Use task boards and other visual instructions this can reduce the anxiety around forgetting what needs to be done.
- Explain the rules and expectations. Tell learners exactly why certain rules are in place and the benefits of following them.
- Ensure that written information on the board is clearly displayed.
- Encourage learners to access Learning Support for help with developing visual strategies. Autistic learners are usually visual learners and can use visual information to their advantage when being able to schedule information and learn effectively.

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- Provide structure for your learners; try to avoid sudden changes to routine. If possible, give advance warning to any changes of structure or routine.
- Help learners deal with any unstructured time (lunch/study hours).
- Be mindful that autistic learners are often the target of bullying, as they are often perceived as being 'different'. This can have devastating effects on their confidence and self-esteem and can lead to mental health problems. Be observant to how others are treating the autistic learner.
- A buddy system can sometimes be successful. Often autistic learners will have special interests, such as gaming or chess. Encourage these learners to join groups with like-minded individuals where they can form friendship bonds over a common interest.
- Be flexible about rules: chewing gum may prevent a learner from muttering in class.
- Autistic people may also give the appearance of being compliant and willing to do any task they are asked and may not give a verbal indication they have not understood your request.
- They may sometimes mask that they have problems by deflection or not being able to stick to tasks. This may manifest itself by the learner not being able to complete tasks, varying the task given and/or just concentrating on the elements they find interesting or drawn to.

When producing worksheets:

- Use a clear font.
- Use font size 12 or 14.
- Use line spacing of at least 1.5.
- Have clear spaces between paragraphs.
- Use bullet points or numbered lists for tasks.
- Avoid narrow columns.
- Remove any unhelpful pictures and distractions, any visuals should be relevant and aid understanding.

Planning time and workload

- Autistic learners may find it hard to ask for help or to say that they have finished a task.
- Poor executive functioning is a key feature of autism so autistic learners may find it hard to plan and problem solve. As a result they may struggle with organisation, time management and meeting deadlines.
- General questions are especially difficult for autistic learners to cope with – they may become engrossed in one aspect of an assignment or task and fail to answer the question. How can you help?

Organising their work

- Provide a clear timetable. This may be a visual/pictorial one if more suited to the learner's needs.
- Give the learner advanced warning of any timetable or venue changes.
- Develop a clear work schedule showing what work needs completing and by when. The learner may find it useful to use planner, diaries, virtual timetable, phones, iPads to plan ahead and put deadlines and events in diaries in advance. It may be beneficial to schedule workplace reviews and assessments several months in advance.
- Ensure assignment hand in dates are clear and written in their diary, set reminders on their phone at intervals.
- Help learners to prioritise their workload – planning is really difficult for them. Make to do lists. Use apps such as evernote/google keep to make lists and reminders.
- Encourage learners to organise their work, either with an online portfolio or paper portfolio with coloured sub-sections.
- It is also useful for the learner to print on the same colour paper (e.g independent study tasks on green paper).
- Learners should also be taught how to organise their time to plan and meet deadlines – this should form part of their individual learning plan. It may be useful to use visual timers for this.
- Provide a tick sheet to support work that needs to be completed either in a workshop or between reviews in the work place.
- Help provide structure for work to be done independently in-between reviews/workshops/assessments.
- Help learners to develop a clear structure at home as well.
- Learners can get upset if they are told that they have made a mistake
- Teach them how to self-correct.

Understanding the task

- Break long tasks/questions into manageable sections – using flow charts may be particularly useful.
- Teach how to deconstruct a written question.
- Use writing frames to support the completion of tasks.
- Give written instructions rather than a verbal list.
- Give a clear idea of how much time a learner is expected to spend on a task.
- Put clear time limits when asking for written work, support learners to stay on topic e.g rather than ask 'write everything you know about the beginning of the 1st world war' ask the learner to 'give 10 reasons why the war started' etc.
- Give a clear assignment plan with key questions.
- When asking for a goal or a preference for something provide options as autistic learners have difficulties making a free choice.
- Link the questions/work to learner special interest if possible.
- Give extra time for a physical task if fine or gross motor skills are an issue.
- Allow the use of pictures /diagrams in assignments to show understanding if possible.
- Learners may find it hard to move from topic to topic so allow plenty of time to finish one and introduce a new topic.
- Ensure one task is finished before introducing a new one.
- Explain how they will know when they have completed the task.
- Use visual cues to show change of task.
- Autistic people may also give the appearance of being compliant and willing. to do any task they are asked and not may not give a verbal indication they have not understood your request.
- They may sometimes mask they have problems by deflection or not being able to stick to tasks. This may manifest itself by the learner not being able to complete tasks, varying the task given and/or just concentrating on the elements they find interesting or drawn to.

Appendix 2 - Case Studies

Case Study 1 - Darren James Success Story (ACT)

A self-confessed 'petrol head', eighteen year old Darren James from Pontyclun is well on his way to achieving his dreams of becoming a heavy vehicle diesel fitter. After completing a Traineeship programme with Wales' leading training provider, ACT, Darren is now thriving as an Apprentice with one of Wales' Premier tour operators, Edward Coaches.

Darren loves working with vehicles, but having been home-schooled throughout childhood he was unsure of what opportunities were available to him:

"I was home schooled with my brother, until I was 15 and a family friend suggested ACT as a way for us to get into college. We looked in to it for my brother first and then when we saw he was doing well, I followed him a year later."

After researching the many different routes available, Darren joined ACT's Traineeship programme, a Pre-Apprenticeship training programme that prepares 16-18 year olds for the world of work. With a keen interest in motor vehicles, he chose to enrol onto a Level 1 Traineeship in Vehicle Maintenance Repair, working hard to overcome the many barriers to learning he faced.

Darren's commitment and drive did not go unnoticed by his tutors, and in 2017 he was nominated for the 'Traineeship of the Year' award at ACT's internal awards in the Motor Vehicle category.

Commenting on the accolade, Darren said, "I was shocked and very surprised to win the award as I was not expecting to be put forward for it but I am so grateful to the tutors for nominating me."

Ros Smith, Care, Support and Guidance Co-ordinator at ACT, who nominated Darren for the award and played a key role in his learner journey said, "Since joining ACT, Darren's really come out of his shell and he's worked hard to build his employability skills. What an achievement for a learner who lacked confidence."

Darren had initially struggled to adapt to the new work and social situations he found himself in, but was determined to persevere and overcome any obstacles he faced. His tutors were incredibly supportive and encouraged Darren to take part in a pilot scheme, which enabled him to gain access to an educational psychologist for an assessment.

The outcome resulted in Darren being officially stated as having Special educational needs and gaining additional support from his Motor Vehicle tutors via an ALS worker (Additional Learner Support) who provided excellent one-to-one support for Darren during his qualification.

Ros was successfully able to progress Darren onto a Level 2 Heavy Goods course with Cardiff and the Vale College, which later led to an Apprenticeship with Edwards Coaches. All this within a 3 year period. Darren Gould, ACT Motor Vehicle

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Sector Lead and Darren's tutor commented, "I'm very proud of Darren for overcoming his barriers and realising his dreams. He deserves all of the success for all his hard work and efforts."

Darren himself added, "I couldn't believe it at first when Edwards offered me the Apprenticeship. I was so excited. I now go to college one day a week and work with a brilliant group of men who 'take the mick' a lot but who also take time to teach me the job."

Jason Campfield, Fleet Engineer at Edward Coaches commented, "Darren's been with us since September and he's settling in really well. He gets his head down and cracks on with the tasks at hand, which is brilliant. Of course it's the early stages of his Apprenticeship but he's learning a lot and there are plenty of opportunities for him to continue to progress and develop his skills and knowledge further so he can take on even more responsibility. We support our Apprentices every step of the way and we're currently also putting Darren through a driving course so he'll hopefully have his licence soon too. We also keep in regular contact with the college, so we're always aware of how he's doing on his course."

Apprenticeship schemes have been an excellent resource for Edwards Coaches, who use their Apprentices to grow and nurture a skilled workforce to suit their business needs. They currently have around 10 Apprentices working across their business.

Jason added, "As a company we massively benefit from Apprenticeship schemes as it means we get to mould our learners to our specific needs. There are plenty of car mechanics out there but working with buses is very different so it's not always easy to find mechanics who have the experience and skillset we need. We would definitely recommend Apprenticeship schemes to other businesses as they allow you to train your workforce to fit your specific requirements."

Darren is one of thousands of Apprentices who is benefiting from the chance to specialise and develop his skillset, and he is looking forward to taking advantage of the many opportunities that lie ahead for him. Reflecting on his journey to date, he said:

"If I hadn't gone to ACT and began my Traineeship, I wouldn't have had the chance to learn about motor vehicles till later on in college - if I had even made it there to begin with. ACT has given me a huge amount of support and I would highly recommend them to absolutely anyone."

Talking about his future plans, Darren added, "I'm looking forward to completing the Apprenticeship, including the additional improver year I'm currently doing, and working towards my goal of being a fully qualified heavy vehicle diesel fitter. I'm really excited for what the future holds."

Case Study 2 - Little Tigers Day Care (ACT)

We are very proud as a nursery to announce that our apprentice Ellie Curtis aged 18 years was announced as 'Apprentice of the Year' 2017 by Monmouthshire business awards at a lavish awards ceremony at the Celtic Manor on Friday 6th October. Ellie was chosen out of over 200 candidates over the whole of Monmouthshire.

Ellie joined us in September 2015 as a young 17 year old apprentice who was about to step into the scary (but enjoyable) world of working with young children. Ellie fresh out of college came with her own personal issues that she was clearly striving to work against and manage, for Ellie has Autism, Dyslexia and Irlen Syndrome. Does she let this stop her.....NO she doesn't. As her manager I have never met such a determined and focused young lady who is set to prove everyone wrong (especially her previous schools), that she CAN achieve and gain a career that she has always wanted.

Ellie did her training via ACT in Cardiff as well as working closely with her supportive colleagues. Ellie has completed numerous courses such as Speech and Language, Foundation phase training, First Aid, Food Hygiene, Additional needs training and working alongside children with ASD. Due to her own personal knowledge and that gained on training it became clear who our Additional needs co-ordinator should be..... Ellie. She took over as our designated ALNCo in September 2016 and she has been able to work wonderfully alongside children and their families to ensure focused care and education is received as well as specific support. She attends all meetings with other professionals and directs the way forward for children who need that little bit more support.

We are all exceptionally proud of Ellie and all she is achieving, She has always said that she 'wants to help and support children like her' – Well she is certainly putting that into practice.

Since Ellie won the award in 2017 she has completed her Level 3 playwork qualification and has now enrolled onto level 5 management.

Case Study 2 - DB Case Study

– Supporting an apprentice in the work place

What were you looking for when employing this apprentice?

We were looking for a Level 3 apprentice to work in our centralised department where the requirement would be to provide accurate and timely information and be able to react to unpredictable situations.

What help did they need in making reasonable adjustments?

The learner (DB) had support from their Apprenticeship Assessor who identified what support they and we (the employer) would need through Access to Work.

What is their story – recruitment journey e.g. What, if anything, did they disclose about their condition or how they wanted to be supported?

DB was upfront with us about their diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome which they were happy to disclose at interview. As they were a suitable candidate we offered them an apprenticeship in our centralized team.

They initially appeared to be very helpful with a compliant nature and showed willing to undertake any tasks they were given. In reality they were distracted, lacked concentration, had memory issues and showed poor organizational skills. This meant mistakes were being made which could be seen across the organization and deadlines were being missed. In turn this was causing the learner to become distressed and they were in danger of not completing their apprenticeship.

What information and support did you supply/put in place?

Assessor Intervention

Following the assessors 1st review it was clear that DB was struggling in the role. We and DB worked together to apply for Access to Work, however, the process took longer than anticipated. In the meantime, the Assessor put the following in place:

- Moved DB to an e-portfolio system so all communications were made digitally
- Made frequent visits to DB and adopted a more hands on approach
- Gave bite size pieces of work with smaller actions.

Access to Work Intervention

The assessor observed DB over a period of time and their assessment recommended that DB move to a more repetitive role where tasks were the same every day. It was felt that this would help DB to make fewer mistakes and present a better fit for their particular skill set.

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What were the Key Milestones?

- 1st review point where issues were identified and addressed
- Move to e-portfolio learning
- Move to new role within organisation

Any Good or Bad experiences and any lessons learned?

Action plans still have to be in place to manage DB to keep them to task and limit their tendency to vary or not complete the tasks given. The learner should be involved in the development of the action plan.

The provider feels that had they been involved earlier they could have supported us through the recruitment process. By the time they became involved DB was already employed.

This particular learner was better suited to a one to one approach.

It is important to keep appointments. The Assessor stressed they cannot miss an appointment as DB becomes agitated. However, sometimes appointments have to be rearranged due to illness, emergencies etc. If appointments have to be cancelled then it is important to notify the learner as soon as possible and to explain why the appointment has to be rearranged and discuss 'what will happen next' e.g. how a new appointment will be arranged, how the learner will be notified, someone they can contact if they need any information or advise in the interim.

Applications for Access to Work funding should be undertaken as soon as possible. Consider the type of work that is being offered to the learner and whether there is capacity within the organization for them to change roles if needed.

Where they are now?

We are much more positive now that DB is in the right role and is more relaxed in the new role. This has given the learner a chance to shine and gain new skills. Their colleagues have now discovered the learner's passion for computers and they naturally offer help to colleagues if they experience computer problems.

DB is still on programme and is working to complete their Level 3 Apprenticeship in 2020.

Case Study 4 - Traineeship Learner at ACT

At the start of ZL's ACT journey, he came in with very low motivation, some unhealthy lifestyle choices and a poor experience of school and learning. At school he struggled to manage his own behaviour, had social and communication difficulties and was also diagnosed with depression. This was complicated further by ZL's a chaotic home life and a lifestyle including a high consumption of junk food and late nights watching TV and gaming.

With the support of Mum and Careers Wales, ZL made the decision to start at ACT on an Engagement IT programme. Together, they felt that he would benefit from the person centred approach at ACT, and the opportunity to engage in the range of learner support services in a supportive and positive environment. ZL was keen to have the opportunity to develop his social skills alongside vocational skills and training.

As part of the support offered, ZL had an Additional Learning Support Assistant assigned to him. In the beginning, he refused any support, as he had no intention of engaging with the programme or taking part in the classes. He would isolate himself by sitting away from everyone, not talk to anyone or make eye contact, and refused to complete any class work.

During ZL's time at ACT we have seen so much growth, it has been lovely to witness the stages of this transformation. Firstly, he started to sit closer to the other learners, but was still not comfortable to say anything. Then he began interacting with them on occasions. Today, he sits with the others, chats frequently and has also been seen engaging with new classmates and helping them to integrate into the group. He has gone from doing no work in class, to putting in minimal effort, and now to showcasing the strength of his ideas. He is fully engaged in the classes, answering questions and completing tasks that have been set.

We have seen such an increase in ZL's confidence, motivation and social development. He is becoming a happy learner who interacts well with his Learning Support Assistant, Tutor and peers. He has progressed from the Engagement programme to the Level 1 Programme and has begun assessment towards his Level 1 Diploma.

Later this year ZL hopes to start on a Level 2 IT course at college and continue his learner journey. ZL will be leaving ACT with a new found confidence and the ability to make friends and interact with his peers. We are very proud of the personal growth and development during his time here and wish him every success for his college journey and future career in IT.