

# **Supporting Children and Adults with Autism to Access Sports and Leisure Activities**

a development resource for those  
supporting individuals with autism to  
access leisure activities



Autism is a 'hidden disability', meaning it is not easy to recognise when someone has the condition. When you see the following pattern (on a wristband, card or mobile device) it means someone has autism and wants you to know so that you can support them:



Individuals with autism have difficulty in accessing sport and leisure activities. Support from staff can make a huge difference, understanding autism has the power to change lives. The information to follow is provided to help you to understand autism and ways in which you can support children and adults with the condition to access your provision.



# Autism

It is estimated that 1 in every 100 people in the UK have Autism

Autism is a lifelong condition and affects people from all backgrounds

Autism affects more males than females

Many people with autism have not been diagnosed, and therefore may not realise they have the condition

Individuals with autism experience difficulties with accessing sport and leisure activities



In this e-learning resource we use the word autism to encompass the spectrum of disorders including:

Autism Spectrum  
Disorder (ASD)

Asperger's  
Syndrome

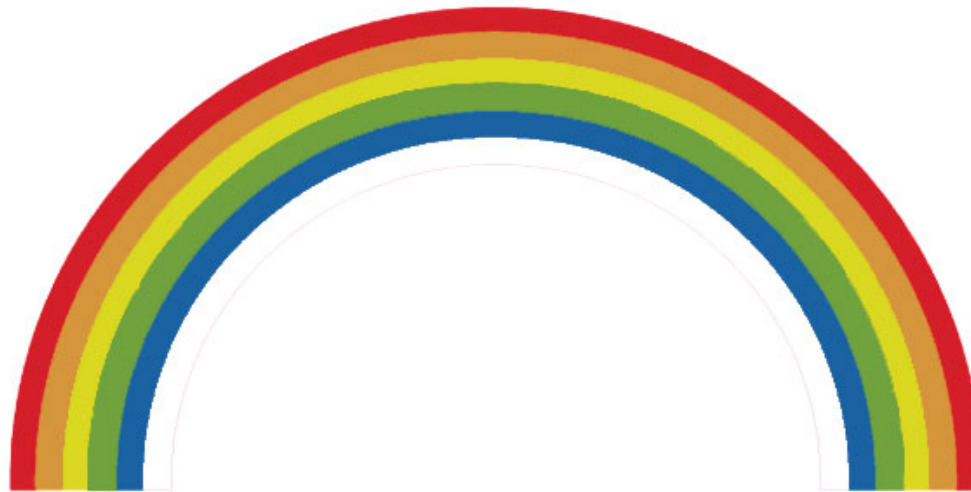
Autistic Spectrum  
Condition (ASC)

Childhood Autism

Pervasive  
Developmental  
Disorder



We refer to an Autism 'Spectrum' because of the way in which the condition affects individuals can vary



On one end of the spectrum people with autism may have an additional learning disability and be more severely impaired

On the other end individuals may have an average or above average intellect and may function at a higher level



# SIGNS of Autism



**S**ocial Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired



**I**magination, ideas and creativity are reduced



**G**estures and non verbal communication are limited



**N**arrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours



**S**ensory responses are unusual





## Social Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired

Individuals with an autism have impairments in social interaction and verbal communication. The way in which the person is affected varies. These impairments can include difficulties in :

understanding social niceties

sharing

taking turns

enjoying conversation

showing concern for others

using and understanding language





## Social Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired

Children with autism may find turn taking and sharing difficult. This can cause problems with friendships with other children.

Children may find it difficult to instigate or join in play with other children.

Social rules may not be understood and additional support or advice may be needed with queuing, turn taking and team activities.

Children and adults with autism may find it difficult to show empathy, this can make them appear 'cold' to others.

People with autism may interpret language literally and so may misunderstand idioms ("pull your socks up") and metaphors ("my head was spinning").

People with autism may not enjoy conversation in the same way, and therefore prefer to discuss factual issues rather than enjoying the interaction with another.







## Social Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired

Here are some ways that you can adapt your communication to help individuals with autism:

Speak slowly and  
clearly

Don't use idioms or  
metaphors

Allow time for the  
individual to process  
information

Keep instructions  
short

Avoid relying on  
gesture, facial  
expression or tone of  
voice





## Social Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired

Here are some ways that you can adapt your communication to help individuals with autism:

Explain “rules” rather than assuming they are understood

Initiate social interactions, if the individual needs help they may not feel confident enough to ask

Stick to facts and keep social chit chat to a minimum

Provide additional instruction in relation to queuing, using changing rooms, payment etc

Provide additional structure within activities involving turn taking or team activities





## Social Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired

### Practice example 1

John, an adult with autism, wants to use the facility and is waiting in reception in order to pay. There is a long queue forming and John is stood to the side of the queue fidgeting whilst other customers in the queue are served.

**What could be the problem? How could you help John?**





## Social Interaction and Verbal Communication are Impaired

John is fidgeting because he is becoming anxious as he does not understand the social rules and needs additional support or advice with activities such as turn taking, team activities and queuing.

John wouldn't have felt confident enough to ask for help, you should always try to initiate any social interactions with individuals with autism.

You could support John by showing him where to queue or open an additional till in order to serve John.





Imagination, ideas and creativity are reduced

People with autism experience reduced imagination, ideas and creativity. Again, the extent varies from one individual to another. The impact of this can be affect many areas of daily life and may include difficulties in:

predicting reactions and  
events

problem solving

relating to others

creative activities

planning

copng with changes





Imagination, ideas and creativity are reduced

## How this impacts on day to day life:

Playing team games often relies on social imagination to predict how other people will interact in the game. This can be difficult for people with autism.

Often making free choices or generating creative ideas is difficult.

Planning can be difficult without good social imagination, people with autism often rely on calendars or planners to help them with this.

When problem solving, we rely on our social imagination to predict possible outcomes. This is difficult for someone with autism.

Some people with autism have difficulties with creative imagination. Others have good creative imagination, and only the social imagination is affected.

Coping with changes can be difficult without good social imagination. People with autism usually prefer routines to unpredictability.





Imagination, ideas and creativity are reduced

Here are some ways that you help individuals with difficulties in social imagination:

Give a limited number of choices when giving options

Use specific questions and limit using open questions

Break down instructions into smaller steps

Support individuals with problem solving

Provide options rather than relying on the individual to create an idea





Imagination, ideas and creativity are reduced

## Practice example 2

Sam, an adult with autism, wants to join the gym. A member of staff meets with Sam to understand what he wants to achieve at the gym, this involves asking lots of open questions such as “What do you want to achieve from using the gym?” and giving Sam lots of options to choose from. Sam becomes anxious when he is unable to answer and no longer wants join the gym.

**What could be the problem? How could you help Sam?**







Imagination, ideas and creativity are reduced

Individuals with autism, like Sam, have reduced imagination, ideas and creativity, this means they find problem solving difficult as we rely on our social imagination to predict possible outcomes. Planning or thinking ahead can also be difficult without a good social imagination which explains why Sam was unable to say what he wanted to achieve from joining the gym.

Sam has difficulties in generating creative ideas or making free choices, to help someone with autism you should give a limited number of choices and provide options rather than making the individual develop their own ideas. Instead of asking open questions you should instead be specific with what you are asking them. For example, instead of “What do you want to achieve from using the gym” you could ask “Do you want to improve your fitness?”





**G**estures and non verbal communication are limited

This can include difficulties in using and understanding:

**facial expression**

**body language**

**tone of voice**

**eye contact**

**gestures**





Gestures and non verbal communication are limited

In order to understand when someone is being sarcastic, we analyse many non verbal cues. This means that people with autism may struggle to recognise and appreciate sarcasm.

Avoiding eye contact maybe interpreted as the individual being rude, it is not.

Those with autism may find it difficult to interpret the meaning of your gestures for example pointing to indicate an object or direction.

We often rely on tone of voice, as well as words to convey a point. People with autism may not be able to use or understand the meaning of this easily.

Many individuals with autism find it difficult to concentrate on giving eye contact and listen at the same time.

Someone with autism may not be able to use or may have limited use of gesture.





Gestures and non verbal communication are limited

Here are some ways that you help individuals with difficulties with gestures and non verbal communication:

Do not rely on gesture or body language to communicate or emphasise a point

Understand many individuals with autism do not like eye contact, they are not being rude

Do not use gestures such as pointing in order to direct someone

Try to keep an even tone of voice

People with autism may find it difficult to imitate movements demonstrated to them





**G**estures and non verbal communication are limited

### **Practice example 3**

Rachel, an adult with autism, asks for directions to the changing rooms from the reception area. A member of staff points in the direction of the changing room. Rachel does not move. The member of staff then gives a long explanation of directions to the changing room, Rachel still does not move.

**What could be the problem? What could be done differently to support Rachel?**





Gestures and non verbal communication are limited

Rachel finds it difficult to use and understand the meaning of gestures such as pointing to show direction, you should not rely on gestures to convey a point and instead say exactly what you mean.

Instead of giving long lists of directions, the member of staff should have broken instructions down into smaller steps in order to make the information manageable for Rachel, writing instructions down could have also helped.

Alternatively, the staff member could have taken Rachel to the changing rooms to avoid misunderstanding and difficulties in communication.





**N**arrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours

Individuals with an autism frequently have narrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours. The way in which the person is affected varies. This can include:

Insistence on repetitive behaviours or rituals

Repetitive movements such as hand flapping, spinning or finger flicking

Dislike of change, new people or activities

Over focussed unusual or highly specific interests and hobbies





**N**arrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours

Here are some ways that you help individuals with :

Explain changes in advance

Use planners and timetables

Engage in special interests

Make allowances for repetitive movements

Understand the need to complete rituals/routines







**N**arrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours

### **Practice example 4**

Alice, a child with autism, usually enjoys her swimming lessons and attends every week. Her usual teacher is not available for this week and Alice is very distressed and is crying, kicking, screaming and refusing to participate in the lesson.

**What could be the problem? What could be done to help Alice if this was to happen again?**





**N**arrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours

Individuals with autism dislike change, new people or activities. Alice was not expecting a different teacher and became anxious when someone unfamiliar was waiting to teach her.

In order to reduce Alice's anxiety in the future you could prepare Alice by warning her of the change as far in advance as possible. You could try gradually introducing Alice to the covering teacher in advance so that she is able to become familiar with them.

If the change was not known about, Alice should still be told about it as soon as possible and as far in advance as possible.

Using picture planners and cards can also be used to help to explain changes.





## Sensory responses are unusual

Many people with an autism can have sensory issues. The individual with autism's perception of the senses can be heightened or decreased. All the senses can be affected.

tactile	• (touch)
vestibular	• (movement)
proprioceptive	• (body position)
visual	• (looking)
auditory	• (hearing)
olfactory	• (smell)
gustatory	• (taste)





## Sensory responses are unusual

Here are some ways that you help individuals with unusual sensory responses:

Dim bright lights and  
turn down loud music

Advise the individual of  
quieter times

Be aware background  
noise can impact on  
their ability to focus on  
what you are saying

Move to a less  
stimulating area when  
giving instruction or  
direction

Try to enable the  
individual to utilise  
sensory equipment  
during activities





## Sensory responses are unusual

### Practice example 5

Tom, an autistic teenager, wants to join in a spin class but gets distressed when he sees how popular the class is and the room it is in and is not able to access the class.

**What could be the problem?**

**What could you do to enable Tom to access exercise classes?**





## Sensory responses are unusual

Tom is eager to join in the class but struggles to cope in busy, loud environments. Individuals with autism can have a heightened or decreased perception of the senses and can feel uncomfortable in busy and loud environments.

To help Tom manage in a busy environment, like an exercise class, you could dim any bright lights and turn down loud music and where possible allow the use of sensory equipment such as ear defenders.

You could also advise Tom on quieter times that he could attend.



# How you can help:

If struggling ask – ask the individual, carers or seek advice from others

Be understanding, people with autism can engage successfully in activities but may need support

Consider how you can adapt the environment to decrease sensory issues

Adapt your communication style

Being aware of autism and the difficulties experienced by individuals with autism is key



There are numerous resources to help support individuals with autism on our website.



[www.ASDinfoWales.co.uk](http://www.ASDinfoWales.co.uk)



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