

Children and Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorders Factsheet

Prepared by Child Witness Service

“Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterised by qualitative impairments in reciprocal social interactions and communication, and a restricted, stereotyped, or repetitive pattern of interests and behaviours persisting from the early developmental period. Intellectual ability can fall across the spectrum, and delay/deviance in language development can be marked or mild.” People with autism spectrum disorder are prone to anxiety disorders and depression.

“Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism. People with Asperger Syndrome are often (but not always) of average or above average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language.”ⁱⁱ”

It is important to have an understanding of how the person's autism affects them and may manifest itself in the Court environment. The child's school or family will usually have an assessment by a medical practitioner, psychologist or speech therapist, which can assist to understand how the child or young person communicates. If the child or young person also has an Intellectual Disability (ID), it will also be helpful to read the fact sheet relating to ID.

Behaviour and social interaction

- People with ASD will react to stressful situations with extreme anxiety. They may start making loud noises, pacing, flapping or wringing their hands. Being out of their ordinary routine and familiar settings is enough to cause extreme anxiety.
- People with ASD often avoid eye contact and in some cases even cover their eyes and ears. When avoidance of eye contact becomes more pronounced, it means their distress is increasing.
- People with ASD may repeatedly ask the same question or copy or repeat the last phrase they heard (echolalia).
- People with ASD may speak in a monotone voice or with stilted pronunciation.
- People with ASD may also experience over- or under- sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.
- People with ASD may have rigid behaviours and fixate on a particular object, topic or issue that is of particular interest to them. For example, they will need to finish talking about a particular topic before moving onto a new topic.

Cognition

- People with ASD are usually unable to identify when they do not understand a question.
- Generally, people with ASD have difficulty reading social cues and lack capacity to imagine, interpret or predict others' thoughts, intentions or emotions, i.e. “Why do you think he did that?” or “Was he angry?”
- People with ASD will not be able to answer questions that have a personal dimension, i.e. “How did that make you feel?”
- People with ASD will have difficulty with working memory and instructions may need to be repeated regularly; his or her attention span and listening skills will be poorer than someone of the same age without ASD.



Words and Language

- People with ASD often understand visual information better than spoken word. Visual supports and aids are useful to explain to the person what is happening.
- People with ASD require clear and unambiguous directions using their name at the beginning of each question/direction i.e. “Sally, I want you to tell me what Johnny did in the kitchen.”

- People with ASD are quite literal. Common figures of speech, metaphors, jokes or sarcasm are likely to cause confusion to someone who interprets language literally. i.e. "Are you pulling my leg." or "Bear with me for one moment."
- People with ASD will require short, simple, concrete questions containing one idea. The words in the question should also be simple and not have multiple meanings i.e. court/tennis court/ caught or hear/here.
- People with ASD will need extra time to answer the questions, in order to process the information. It is important not to ask the next question before they have had time to answer the previous questions. Some questions will take longer to process than others.

Things to avoid

- Questions that require complex processing such as "Do you remember..", tag questions, "Peter didn't do it did he?" or questions that contain one or more negatives.
- A question that suggests the answer, "You went to school that day, didn't you" or provides limited choice "You spoke to John or was it Bill about what happened".
- Repeating questions is likely to upset someone with ASD. If a question is required to be asked again explain why, i.e. "Sally, I want to be clear that I understand your answer."
- Exaggerated facial expressions, tone of voice and hand gestures.

Things that are helpful

- Keep the environment as calm as possible. Speak calmly and clearly in a natural voice.
- It is important for child witnesses with ASD to become familiar with the environment they will be giving evidence from, including the people they will be speaking to in court.
- Visual cues or aids for example a stop card to ask for break or a sign to indicate they need more time to answer the question.
- Regular breaks are helpful, but may not be sufficient if the person becomes overloaded (distressed) and then they will need longer breaks.
- Scheduling evidence to fit in with the child or young person's usual routine.
- Questions that follow a logical, chronological sequence.
- Sign post a change of topic, i.e. "Now we are going to talk about..."

REFERENCES

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ⁱⁱ The National Autism Society(2011) *Autism: a guide for criminal justice professionals*.. www.autism.org.uk page 4

