

Working with Parents with Autistic Spectrum Condition 1 Minute Guide

Working with Parents with Neurodevelopmental Disorders:

- Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

Parents with Autism Spectrum Condition

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder. It is characterised by difficulties in three areas (the 'triad of impairments'):

- Social interaction
- Language and communication
- Thought and behaviour

Autistic people experience sensory problems and either under-react or over-react to sensory stimuli; over reactions or hypersensitivity may relate to sound, touch, smell and taste or a combination of these. There may be difficulties understanding and processing language. Communications need to take account of such impairments, and reasonable adjustments may be needed in written and verbal communication to allow time for the person to understand and process information.

Adults on the autism spectrum include individuals with Asperger`s Syndrome, Atypical Asperger`s Syndrome and Pathological Demand Avoidance. People with Asperger`s Syndrome are of average or above average intelligence. They do not have a learning disability but may have learning difficulties.

Potential Impact on Parenting

Some adults with autism may have significant difficulties in parenting, based on difficulties associated with the neurocognitive features of autism. These difficulties may include:

- ***Weak central coherence***

Central coherence is the ability to focus on the whole situation as well as the details; to process information in context to draw out meaning; to follow through on various plans; to prioritise what is important.

Individuals with autism often have a tendency to focus on details rather than the whole picture. This could have implications for child care.

- ***Poor cognitive shifting***

People with autism may have difficulty shifting the scope and focus of their attention; to shift to a different thought or action in response to changes.

Parents often have to deal with conflicting demands, and often have to redirect their attention under pressure. People with autism may react to this pressure by withdrawing, emotionally shutting down, or with sudden outbursts of anger, which would then have implications for the care of a child.

- ***Poor theory of mind***

People with autism may have problems understanding that other people have their own plans, thoughts, views, beliefs, attitudes and emotions. This may affect their ability to interpret and appropriately meet the needs of a child.

Difficulties in determining a child's intentions may also impact on boundary setting and behaviour management.

Difficulties in reading facial expressions and tone of voice may also mean that a parent with autism struggles to interpret a child's behaviour.

Additional challenges

- 70% of people with autism have a significant degree of cognitive impairment.
- Many have additional mental health issues including:
- Depression; anxiety; Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; episodes of psychosis; eating disorders; personality disorder and selective mutism.

Social communication difficulties may contribute to unwillingness by the parent with autism to engage with services or support networks. They may misunderstand or misinterpret what has been said to them and may consequently withdraw or react with anger and frustration.

Rigidity in thinking and obsessional traits limits their capacity to change where there are significant concerns about the safety and well-being of the child.

Recommended Resources

- Royal College of Psychiatry: free information leaflets www.rcpsych.ac.uk
- National Autistic Society www.nas.org.uk
- NICE Guidelines for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism in Adults (2011)