






Phone Link Ups

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders













Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition that affects the way people communicate and relate to others and their environment. **Autism Spectrum Australia** (also known as **Aspect**) estimates that there are 120,000 people with **Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)** living in Australia. This includes an estimated 30,000 children and young people with ASDs in Australia and 9,000 children and young people in NSW (www.aspect.org.au).





'Autism Spectrum Disorders' is an umbrella term that refers to:

-  **Autistic disorder**
-  **Asperger's disorder**
-  **Atypical autism**

People affected by an **Autistic** disorder (also known as Infantile Autism or Childhood Autism) will typically have difficulty with communication skills and social interactions, and display repetitive behaviours or restricted interests. Many will be sensitive to sensory stimulation, that is, being over or under-reactive to specific sensory experiences. People with an Autistic disorder will often have an intellectual disability.

Every child will be different and not every characteristic will be evident in all children. Some of the behaviours that may be observed in young children with Autistic disorder include:

-  There may be unusual responses to other people, e.g. no desire for physical contact
-  A preference not to make or maintain eye contact
-  Repetitive movements such as hand flapping and spinning
-  There may be constant crying or alternatively there may be an unusual absence of crying
-  Restrictive interests in specific toys or objects
-  Strong resistance to a change of routine or environment
-  The child may appear to avoid social situations, preferring to be alone
-  Difficulties understanding feelings and emotions
-  Limited development of play activities, particularly imaginative play
-  There may be difficulties eating, e.g. a child may resist solid foods or not accept a variety of foods in their diet
-  There may be difficulties sleeping
-  An absence of speech, or unusual speech patterns, e.g. such as repeating words and phrases (echolalia)

-  May use a flat or monotone speaking voice
-  A literal or concrete understanding of words
-  There may be difficulties with toilet training
-  Distress at certain noises or situations, e.g. shopping centres.







SOURCE: The above information has been adapted from information contained on the **Autism Victoria** website (www.autismvictoria.org.au) and the fact sheet, '**Autism Spectrum Disorders**' by **Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs Inc.** (www.rucsn.org.au).

People affected by **Asperger's** disorder typically have difficulty with social interactions and display repetitive behaviours or restricted interests. There is not usually significant difficulty with communication skills. Most people with Asperger's disorder have an intellectual ability within the normal range. People with Atypical autism may demonstrate some of the core characteristic of Autistic disorder but the criteria for diagnosis is not fully met.

Accessing information about ASD can help when you are preparing to include a child with this diagnosis. It is important however to be mindful of the variation of characteristics that may be evident in children with ASD and to take care not to make assumptions about a child because of a label and some knowledge of it.

All children will be a unique combination of personality and temperament, with individual strengths, interests and needs. Ability is only one aspect of a child's identity. Labelling a child by their disability alone ignores other important aspects of the child's identity, such as culture or gender. Further, just because you have worked with a child with ASD previously doesn't mean you will need to work with another child with this label in the same way. Nor does it mean that what you have read about ASD will apply for all children. Rather than focusing on a label alone - and your knowledge of the label - remember to get to know this child in the same way that you would all others. Spending time getting to know the child and building a positive relationship with them will help you know and understand their strengths, abilities and interests and be able to use this information to facilitate their full participation in the program.

Rather than focusing on what a child with ASD cannot do, pay attention to what it is they do well as a means of supporting their ongoing learning and development. Working with strengths means that you are more able to provide effective scaffolding for the children's learning. It also means that children are more likely to be more interested and engaged in this process. Some of the learning strengths of children with ASD include the ability to:







-  Remember information
-  Take in information in chunks
-  Learn and repeat routines
-  Think in literal or concrete terms
-  Attend to areas of special interest
-  Use visual cues to make sense of information.

SOURCE: Jansen, 1996, cited in '**Thinking and Learning in Autism**' information sheet, **Autism Spectrum Australia** (www.aspect.org.au)]

Talking with the child's family will also provide you with useful information in order to know and understand the child and plan for and respond to them more effectively. Acknowledge them as the expert on their child and treat them as your prime consultants and source of information. Use your enrolment and orientation procedures as an opportunity to find out all you need to know about the child, for example, their strengths, interests and capabilities, sense of humour, learning style, cultural background, communication preferences, likes and dislikes and so on. With family permission, it can also help to make contact with other professional involved with the child and family.

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Critical Questions

1. How do you currently access information to get to know and understand all children? How has this information helped you to include a child with ASD?
2. What sources of information have you used to gain an understanding of ASD? How has this information helped you to include a child with ASD?
3. On reflection, what additional information would have helped? How/where might you go to access this information?

When including a child with additional needs, including those with ASD, sometimes we can look beyond the resources and strengths available within the children's service itself. The existing strengths and wealth of knowledge and expertise available in your team, families and local agencies should not be underestimated. They are certainly a great place to start in determining what resources are already available to you and when you may need to access external or additional supports. Some critical questions to consider might include:

-  What are the key strengths that you can draw upon that might help you include a child with ASD?
-  Reflect on a time when you have successfully included a child with ASD in the past? What happened?
-  Who do you know who has done this successfully? How did they do it? How might this help in your situation?

Making contact with your **local Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF)** can help you identify and build on what you are already doing and determine and locate other resources and supports that might help. The role of ISF is to help you feel more capable and confident to be responsive to all children and families, including children with additional needs.

Working in partnership with you, your ISF will talk to you about what is currently happening in your program; help you identify your specific goals – or what you would like to be happening; determine what you are already doing to achieve them; and assist you to access any additional information, resources and supports that might help. ISFs can also help you to link with other community organisations and agencies; to identify your professional development needs; and to access information that can assist you to develop, implement and sustain flexible inclusive practices. This information is then written into a plan, referred to as a Service Support Plan (SSP), that identifies the specific steps or actions you will take to achieve your goals.






Your ISF can also help you access the funded supports available through the Inclusion Support Program, where it is determined they are required to support a child's inclusion. Two examples include the **Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS)** and **Flexible Support Funding (FSF)**. ISS funding is a contribution towards the costs associated with providing additional support to include a child with ongoing high support needs for approved purposes as specified in the **ISS Guidelines**. The subsidy includes funding towards the cost of extra staff, releasing staff for inclusion training and access to specialised equipment. FSF can provide you with immediate short-term support to meet inclusion needs for children with ongoing high support needs. FSF may be used for example, where it is unclear if an additional worker is required on an ongoing basis or when a school aged child doesn't access ISS but extra support is required for activities such as excursions during vacation care. For both ISS and FSF,

eligibility of a child for does not mean an automatic entitlement to support. The process of determining which resources and supports will best meet your needs is done by developing an SSP.

If you haven't already done so, contact your local **Inclusion Support Agency (ISA)** to talk with them about what they do and how they can assist you to address you needs and meet your goals. To find the ISA for your region contact **Children's Services Central** on **1800 157 818** or visit their website at www.cscentral.org.au.

A number of resources and support are also available through the **Professional Support Coordinator (PSC)**, **Children's Services Central**, to assist you with your inclusive practices. This includes training, specialist equipment, general resource library, phone support, web-based and on-line resources and supports and newsletters. Together with assistance provided from your ISF, this range of complimentary services provides you with responsive and relevant support to address your professional learning needs, including those that relate more specifically to inclusive practice.







In addition, there are a number of state and national resource and support agencies available to assist you to feel more informed, confident and capable to include a child or children with ASD. A list of websites is included below for your information:

-  www.aspect.org.au - the website for the Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) provides information, education and other services through partnerships with people with autism spectrum disorders, their families and communities. This includes a range of information brochures and factsheets.
-  www.tonyattwood.com.au - the website of Dr Tony Attwood, a psychologist and the author of several books on Asperger's Syndrome.
-  www.mugsy.org/wendy - the website of Wendy Lawson. Wendy has ASD and is the author of a number of books and DVDs on ASD.
-  www.templegrandin.com - the website of Dr Temple Grandin. Temple has ASD and is the author of several books, videos and DVDs on ASD.
-  www.rucsn.org.au - the website of Child Inclusive Learning and Development Australia Inc (formerly Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs Inc). Click on News + Publications, and Factsheets + Articles for a fact sheet on Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Critical Questions

1. What strengths and expertise exist within your service team that might assist you to include a child with ASD?
2. What resources and support services exist within your local community that might assist you to include a child with ASD?
3. What additional and/or external resources and support services do you know of that might help? How will you access this support?

References and Further Reading

-  **Autism Spectrum Disorders** - a fact sheet; Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs Inc.; www.rucsn.org.au
-  **Diagnosis & Definitions**; Autism Victoria; www.autismvictoria.org.au
-  **Inclusion Support Agency Guidelines** (December, 2005) Department of Family and Community Services
-  **Thinking and Learning in Autism** - an information sheet (2002); Autism Spectrum Australia; www.aspect.org.au
-  **What is asperger's syndrome?** (2007-2008); Dr Tony Attwood; <http://www.tonyattwood.com.au/ad.html>
-  **What is Autism?** - an information sheet (2002): Autism Spectrum Australia; www.aspect.org.au

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Program for Isolated Children, Families and Communities

