

Autism and Asperger Syndrome



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Autism and Asperger Syndrome are just two disorders within the range of Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

Autism is a developmental condition which can occur at any time in a child's early years of development - often when another child in the family is born. You cannot tell an individual has Autism by looking at them. It upsets the way the brain uses the information it receives and this results in problems with communication.

There are a number of other medical terms used to describe the condition, and sometimes it exists as part of another disorder.

Autism is not infectious and others cannot catch it by contact or association!

Asperger Syndrome is usually used for those who are more able, and/or have better language development. Individuals may be more willing to make social contacts but this may be done in ways that are naïve and inappropriate.

Living with Autism

At the moment, no one knows the cause and there is no known cure, but different ways of working with an individual with Autism can make the condition worse or better. People with Autism have difficulty in making human contact, particularly eye contact. They also have a tendency to fix on inanimate objects.

An individual with Autism may swing from being excessively loud and noisy to very quiet and withdrawn. They may kick and pinch others out of frustration for no apparent reason.

Some individuals can be very gifted at drawing or playing a musical instrument but may find it

difficult to do anything that requires social interaction.

Communication and language problems are some of the main difficulties encountered, which can affect meaningful speech, reading, writing or sign language.

Often an individual with Autism will repeat back sounds or conversations which can not only be annoying to the speaker but also give the impression that they have understood more than they actually have.

The individual may have difficulty in knowing when to interrupt or when not to call out, laugh or shout.

A family may find that a child with Autism has a very different sleep pattern to their other children - perhaps always waking at 5am and being wide awake and wanting to do something.

Practical tips

Leaders need to be thoroughly acquainted with the individual and their parents. It is important to establish a level of trust that will allow the problems to be openly discussed.

Keep instructions simple and do not assume they have been understood. You may have to help in a game until the individual starts to understand what is going on.

An individual with Autism will often copy others, so if you shout they may shout more. Other young people may start copying the noises made and this will only make the problem worse.

They may also show a number of other habits such as hand flapping, opening and closing doors, walking round a chair before sitting down, or even

head banging or biting. In such cases you need to talk to the parents to find the best way of handling the situation.

Talk to the parents to see if there are any activities that you may help to quieten an individual down if they are over excited. This might be drawing, cutting out, doing a jigsaw or even washing up!

What else do I need to know?

There is no reason why an individual with Autism cannot join a Scout Group, the range of activities and experiences offered may help them to reach their full potential.

Leaders must be aware that it may make a difference to the way they run their activities. An essential step is to have a full and honest discussion with the parents to identify all the issues before you start.

It is worth discussing the normal pattern at home to find out how long the individual sleeps. If they only sleep six hours remember that if they go to bed at 10.30pm they may be wide-awake and wanting to run around the campsite at 4.30am.

Find out if there are any special routines in use at home and/or school which you could link with. You may find that life is very ordered, or there is a special way to give instructions such as "First we wash then we change for bed".

Like many young people an individual with Autism, may wander off from a Scouting activity. There are however a couple of problems to be aware of:

- If their communication is poor they will not be able to ask for the way back if they get lost.
- They may not remember basic safety rules such as how to cross the road.
- A discussion with the parent will identify this problem at home, so at least you are prepared.
- At camp you may wish to explain to anyone camping nearby that if they see the individual wandering around - can they bring him/her back to you.
- Some individuals with Autism may carry some identification explaining their condition when they

are out so that if they get lost anyone finding them would know where or who to contact.

As with many children there may be no sense of danger. However, explaining dangers does not mean necessarily that they have understood them, so you may need to watch them carefully.

Further Information

Discuss with the parents the extent to which help is needed and learn any practical tips they have to offer. They may also be able to arrange a chat with their teacher or others helping them.

Support Organisations

The National Autistic Society

393 City Road
London
EC1V 1NG
Helpline: 0870 070 4004 (10am-4pm, Monday - Friday)
Telephone: 020 7833 2299
Email: nas@nas.org.uk
Web site: www.nas.org.uk

The Scottish Society for Autism

Hilton House
Alloa Business Park
Whins Road
Alloa
FK10 3SA
Telephone: 01259 720044
E-mail: info@autism-in-scotland.org.uk
Web site: www.autism-in-scotland.org.uk

PAPA (Parents and Professionals and Autism)

PAPA Training and Resource Centre
Donard House
Knockbracken Healthcare Park
Saintfield Road
Belfast
BT8 8BH
Telephone: 028 90 401729
Fax: 028 90 403467
Email: info@autismni.org
Web site: <http://www.autismni.org>