

Social Imagination Difficulties



Associated with Autism and Related Conditions

Cambian Information Sheet





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Children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can often struggle to understand the complexities of communication. They may want friendship and conversation but are uncertain how to approach others, fail to give out or read the appropriate social signals, and do not appreciate how their behaviour may need to vary in different situations.

Those with ASD and other related conditions may experience a restricted level of 'social imagination', which makes it difficult to understand what others may be thinking, feeling or experiencing.

Being able to interpret another person's intention and emotion is an important element of social connectedness and is something we all develop over time. In those with ASD, these signals are often interrupted and present themselves differently.

People with ASD may experience challenges in the following areas:

-  **Interacting with others**
-  **Initiating interactions, responding to others, or using interaction to show people things or to be sociable**
-  **Understanding and relating to other people**
-  **Taking part in everyday family, school, work and social life**

It's important to understand that whilst social difficulties are often a sign of ASD or similar conditions, they are not the only factor in achieving a diagnosis, and it's important to get a consultation with a medical professional.

What does the condition look like?

Those with social communication and interaction difficulties have problems understanding what other people mean. Communication is not just the words we use; but how we use our body language, facial expression and tone of voice to communicate with someone else.

Non-Verbal Communication

It may be easy to take for granted all the elements of communication that are non-verbal, which may not be obvious to those with ASD. Some people with ASD are delayed in their development of language and some do not communicate verbally at all. In those cases, other forms of communication may be needed, which can be developed in a specialised school setting.

These non-verbal forms of communication may include:

Crying

Hand Gestures

Emotional Reaction

Moving Your Hands to an Object They'd Like

Using Imagery

Looking Towards Things They Want

Echolalia

Echolalia is a form of verbal communication through the repetition or 'echoing' of other's words. It can often present as a person repeating words that they don't understand. This makes it more difficult to diagnose in children. The person may be using echolalia to try and signal that they don't understand the word or phrasing being used.

People using Echolalia to communicate may be using words previously learnt under certain circumstances to ask for something. For example, if they were asked for a drink, they may use the word 'drink' to ask a question of their own, not necessarily related to their thirst.

Often, explaining exactly why a particular word, mode of speech or action is best for a certain circumstance can aid understanding and encourage imitation in the future. Inappropriate behaviour or speech must be discouraged every time and correct alternatives offered. This can be applied to other social communication difficulties, not necessarily related to Echolalia.

Understanding Social Behaviours

As mentioned above, those with social communication challenges often struggle to understand particular social cues. This may mean that under certain circumstances, the person may find themselves reacting differently, or saying something out of the norm for everyday conversation. These signifiers aren't something people with ASD can pick up naturally and may need to be taught. Once they understand the reason why we do certain things they are more likely to learn these skills.

It should be noted that there may be a lack of 'generalisation of skills', as sometimes social skills learnt in the home, for instance, may not automatically be applied into new situations and environments. This is where a home-education balance can take place, ensuring the same practices used at home, can be applied at school by teachers or carers.

Stages of Communication

Communication can be broken down into different categories:

Pre-intentional

Saying and doing things that aren't intended to affect those around them. This can be seen in a possible reaction to something entertaining or upsetting.

Intentional

Used to send messages to others. This may present in the form of protest or to ask for something.

The move from pre-intentional communication to intentional communication is a big step for an Autistic child. A child's development will determine how far they progress into the stages of Intentional Communication, and this will be affected by ASD and related conditions. These stages can be broken down using 'The Hanen Programme'.

The Hanen Programme Stages Include:

The Own Agenda Stage

The Requester Stage

The Early Communicator Stage

The Partner Stage

The Own Agenda Stage

The person appears uninterested in others and tends to play or do activities alone. Their communication will be mainly pre-intentional.



The Requester Stage

The person has begun to realise that their actions have an effect on others. They are likely to communicate their wants and what they enjoy by pulling you towards objects, areas or games.

The Early-Communicator Stage

Interactions will begin to increase in length and become more intentional. They will begin to point to things that they want to show you and begin to shift their gaze, beginning to engage in a two-way interaction.



The Partner Stage

The person will be using speech and will be able to carry out a simple conversation. While they may appear confident and capable when using communication in familiar settings, they may struggle when they enter an unfamiliar environment (e.g. a new school).

In these places, they may use memorised phrases and appear to be ignoring their communication partner, speaking over them and ignoring the rules of turn-taking.



Things to look out for:

Social imagination difficulties and other related conditions may also present in other ways.

The use and meaning of eye contact

Some children with communication difficulties may find it physically painful to give or maintain eye contact with others so may need to be given an alternative, such as looking at someone's forehead.

It may also be difficult for them to maintain eye contact and listen at the same time so you may need to decide which is most important at a given moment.

Inflections and voice tone, volume, rhythm and speed

It might be necessary to explain what the variations mean and where they are generally used – for instance, a harsh tone means someone is angry; speaking quietly may be appropriate in a place of worship or in a library etc.

Suitable length of conversations, including beginning and ending one

It's useful to teach them how to listen, wait for a gap in a conversation before joining in, and how not to dominate a conversation with their own interests.

They may also like to know the reason why certain things are done before they have to do them – just telling them to do something will not always suffice.

Physical proximity to others

Some people may not understand that standing too close to people when talking to them may make the other person feel uncomfortable, but that it is okay to stand close to someone in a long queue. These are skills that most of us will learn intuitively but people with social challenges may not.

Meeting unfamiliar and new people

This can be stressful, but is helped by knowing how to greet someone, how to behave and what to say. Again, role play can help prepare children for what may be said and how they could respond appropriately. It may be helpful to teach those with a social disorder how to politely engage in conversation, and listen to others, whether or not you have an interest in the subject matter.

How can you be of support?

Follow Their Lead

Follow the person's lead, rather than directing them. They will be more likely to pay attention to the activity, more likely to focus on the same thing as you, and will learn how to make choices for themselves.

Build in time for communication

When someone is unable to communicate their needs, it's tempting to help by constantly doing things for them.

For example, fetching their shoes and tying their shoelaces, bringing a biscuit. However, this may reduce opportunities for the person to communicate.

Spare an extra few minutes for these tasks to help them understand what's happening around them and to think about what they can say during these activities.

Early on

If the person has only recently started to talk, use single words to communicate with them.

For example, label their favourite toy and repeat that word when they reach for it.

Use expansions

Add in more information to what they say.

For example, if they say 'car', you can reply 'yes, blue car'.

That way you are only giving them one more piece of information to process, but helping them develop a more thorough vocabulary.

Website resources:

NHS

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/> is a well-rounded NHS resource with a plethora of easily understood information on Autism.

Autism Education Trust

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk AET is dedicated to coordinating and improving education support for all children on the autism spectrum in England. Downloadable resources and toolkits for education staff.

Autism.com

www.autism.com the website of the Autism Research Institute in US which contains lots on information for families and individual.

Days Out

www.daysout.com a one stop directory for great family days out – attractions which have good facilities and access for visitors with disabilities and special needs have a specific identifying symbol.

NAS Surrey Branch

<http://www.nassurreybranch.org/home.html> is the website of The NAS (Surrey Branch), an excellent site with lots of up to date information, news, and resources wherever you are in the country.

Futher Resources and Contacts:

The National Autistic Society

The largest autism charity in the UK can help with local support groups; information on autism for individuals, parents, professionals; befriending; training; links and much more.

Website: www.autism.org.uk Helpline: **0808 800 4104** Supporter Care Team: **0808 800 1050**

BIBIC (British Institute for Brain Injured Children)

They help children with conditions affecting their social, communication and learning abilities.

Website: www.bibic.org.uk Email: info@bibic.org.uk Tel: **01458 2533444**

Cerebra

For parents of children with brain injuries and neurological problems including Asperger syndrome and Autism.

Website: www.cerebra.org.uk Email: enquires@cerebra.org.uk Parent Support: **01267 244 200**

Contact a Family

UK wide advice on all aspects of caring for a child with any special need, disability or rare disorder.

Website: www.cafamily.org.uk

The Disabilities Trust

Provides a range of specialist education services, housing and support for children and adults with Autism.

Website: www.disabilities-trust.org.uk and www.autism-awareness.org.uk Tel: **01444 239123**