Autism is not me. Autism is just an information processing problem that controls who I am.

Donna Williams,
author of Nobody, Nowhere & Somebody, Somewhere
Students with ASDs are described as sharing a triad of impairments that affects their ability to understand and use non-verbal and verbal communication, understand social behaviour – which affects their ability to interact with other students and adults – and think and behave flexibly, which may be shown in restricted, obsessional or repetitive activities. This triad may be described as a tripartite cluster of specific abnormal patterns of social, communicative and thought behaviours. It has been suggested that an additional dimension related to difficulties in processing sensory information might also be added to the triad.

Impairments in communication refer to verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal difficulties may include a delay in the development of language, comprehension difficulties, literalness, poorly modulated intonation and delivery of speech, echolalia (echoing speech), unusual vocabulary and repetitive use of language.

Non-verbal difficulties include difficulty in empathising with others and in appropriately interpreting social cues, body language and facial expressions. Gestures are often stiff, stilted or over-exaggerated.

Students demonstrate a lack of flexibility of thinking and behaviour and one may notice poor social imagination, resistance to change, restricted and/or repetitive activities and routines, and an obsessional and narrow range of interests.

Symbolic play and joint attention skills are also impaired in students with ASDs. A lack of ‘shared attention’ or difficulty participating in the activities or enjoyment of others has been highlighted as a particular challenge to teachers as it affects the student’s ability to share interests, have varied interests, adapt behaviour according to the situation, accept changes in rules and routines, engage in imaginative play with others, accept others’ points of view and generalise learning.

Furthermore students with ASDs may engage in hand flapping, rocking or spinning; demonstrate heightened sensitivity to noise, smell, taste, touch or visual stimuli; experience erratic sleep patterns; display unusual eating habits; engage in self-injurious or aggressive or hyperactive behaviour; exhibit an unusual posture or gait and possess irrational fears or phobias.

Since the 1980s the idea has emerged of a spectrum which acknowledges the impact of both the range of general learning disability and level of ASDs for the student’s learning and teaching programmes.
Asperger’s Syndrome

There is no right type of Asperger’s. People with Asperger’s are as varied as Norwegians and trombone players.

Mark Haddon, author of  

Asperger’s syndrome is thought to fall within the spectrum of autism, but with enough distinct features to warrant its own label. It is characterised by subtle impairments in three areas of development: social communication, social interaction and social imagination. There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in language acquisition. However, students with Asperger’s syndrome have communication difficulties and may speak in a monotonous or exaggerated tone and at great length about a topic that is of particular interest to them irrespective of the reaction of the listener. Students find it difficult to interpret social signals and interact with others. They often excel at memorising facts and figures but exhibit difficulty thinking in the abstract ways required for subjects such as English and Religious Education.

Students may have additional motor co-ordination and organisational problems such as a tendency to compartmentalise thinking (e.g. completion of a task may be perceived as unrelated to the presentation of the task), difficulties in managing time and completing work, eating, drinking and sleeping irregularities, an inability to block out distractions affecting attention span, inappropriate eye contact, and sensory and perceptual sensitivities. Asperger’s syndrome affects students in the average to above average ability range.
The following table provides a summary of the range of approaches that have been developed to meet the needs of students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). A decision to use a particular approach should be based on an in-depth knowledge of the student, what one wishes to teach and what the student needs to learn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches commonly used with students with ASDs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactive Approaches</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis is placed on assisting the student in developing relationships and engaging in reciprocal communication through structuring naturalistic and incidental learning and teaching contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communicative Approaches</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ communications skills are specifically targeted, promoted and developed through the use of approaches such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), the Lámh manual signing system and/or the use of real objects, symbols, pictures, photographs, drawings and written words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TEACCH</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH) approach is based on the rationale that students with ASDs progress better in structured rather than in unstructured environments and incorporates a physical organisation of the environment, visual schedules, work-systems and task organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Stories™</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Stories™ are designed to enable the student to cope with social situations which he/she finds difficult. They are visual, identify relevant cues, provide easily accessible accurate information for the student and describe expected behaviours. Role play and video may be used to enhance this process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inclusion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion is used as the learning medium and students are taught to directly participate in activities with their non-ASD peers. ‘Buddy systems’, circle of friends approaches and Social Stories™ are successfully used to promote this process. The importance of providing mainstream peers with accurate, age-appropriate, ASD-awareness information in inclusive settings is stressed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Approaches commonly used with students with ASDs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioural Approaches</th>
<th>Information and Communication Technology (ICT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural approaches originate from Skinner’s work in the 1950s and focus on modifying and shaping student’s behaviour. The behavioural techniques of reinforcement, shaping, promoting and prompt-fading underpin the programme.</td>
<td>Computers have features that distinctively appeal to students with ASDs. Information and Communication Technology may be used to support all areas of the curriculum and to meet student’s needs associated with the triad of impairments. Concealing the computer and incorporating the computer in the student’s daily work schedule are effective strategies for controlling computer access.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Impairments in Social Interaction**

- Students with ASDs are literal thinkers.
- Students are confused by the rules that govern social behaviour.
- Students require direct teaching in social skills.

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**Tips for Learning and Teaching**

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SECTION 2: Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders

- It is necessary to structure opportunities for students to use social skills in different situations.
- Be aware of the difficulties for students inherent in less structured situations such as break, lunchtime, in the corridor and in transitions between lessons.
- Use stories to teach social communication/interaction.
- Develop a ‘Buddy system’ with mainstream peers.
- Directly teach jokes, puns and metaphors.

**Impairments in Language and Communication**

- Students require support in understanding the purpose and value of communication.
- Attention needs to be directed to teaching social aspects of language such as turn taking and timing (some turn taking activities may include board games, hitting a balloon back and forth, telephone conversations, bouncing a ball back and forth, etc).
- Directly teach gestures, facial expressions, emotions, vocal intonation and body language.
- Use visual material and/or signing to support and facilitate students’ communicative initiations and responses.
- Provide precise instructions for students to follow.
- Always refer to the student by name as he/she may not realise that ‘everyone’ includes them.
- Do not expect eye contact and never turn the student’s face towards you.
- Keep verbal instructions brief and simple.
SECTION 2: Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Impairments in Imagination with a Restricted Range of Behaviours, Activities and Interests

- Students must be helped to cope with new and/or varying activities.
- Pre-empt the student’s anxiety that results from being presented with unstructured or unfamiliar situations without prior warning/explanation.
- Devise and implement a structured play/leisure programme.

Additional Tips for Learning and Teaching

- Adjustments may need to be made to the classroom to address the student’s undersensitivity/oversensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch or movement.
- Consider implementing structured and systematic programmes to develop the student’s fine- and/or gross-motor skills.
- Elicit relevant information regarding the student’s eating, drinking and sleeping irregularities.
- Structure the classroom environment to reduce distractions.
- Secure student’s attention prior to issuing instructions/engaging in conversation.
- Provide structures that assist students in understanding the duration of tasks.
- Make the links between different tasks clear to students.
- Use computers to support the student’s learning and teaching opportunities.
- Disapprove of inappropriate behaviour and not of the student.

Additional Resources/References

2. ASPEN (Asperger Syndrome Education Network (US)), website: http://www.aspennj.org/
SECTION 2: Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders


8. Department of Education and Science (DES), Department of Education Northern Ireland, Irish Society for Autism, and PAPA (Parents & Professionals and Autism) Northern Ireland *Autistic Spectrum Disorder – A Teacher’s Toolkit CD*. (All schools were issued with copies of this CD.)


14. The Irish Society for Autism  
   Autism – An Introduction (Video), website:
   http://www.iol.ie/~isa1/

   London: Jessica Kingsley.


   London: Souvenir Press.


20. National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) has information pertaining to Information and
    Communication Technology and ASDs, website: http://www.ncte.ie/

    David Fulton Publishers.

22. Sandbox Learning: free social skills book in which one can customise text and pictures for students
    with ASDs to learn social skills, website: http://www.sandbox-learning.com/

    http://www.sess.ie/

24. Special Education Support Service (SESS) has listed a number of sites related to ASDs, website:
    http://www.sess.ie/

    Play and Imagination in Children with Autism, New York: Teachers’ College Press.
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Notes