# Autistic Spectrum Disorders – Information for Teachers

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The National Autistic Society (NAS) describes autism as ‘a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them’.

Autism is a spectrum condition and affects individuals in different ways, with different degrees of severity. At the lower end of the spectrum, ASDs are often associated with learning disabilities. Children with higher-end disorders, such as Asperger's Syndrome, tend to have an average or above-average IQ.

However, all people with ASDs share difficulties with:

* Communication
* Social interaction
* Thinking and behaving flexibly

In addition, some children with ASDs are especially sensitive to their environment. Noise, bright colours, strong smells, strip lighting and over-busy visual stimuli can cause stress or even physical pain. Other children can see these pupils as ‘odd’ and fair game for teasing/bullying; teachers need to be on the look-out for this. The NAS report that more than 40% of children with ASD are bullied at school. Also, a high percentage of ASD pupils can become bullies themselves. Although they are not aware of this, it is because they like to control others.

Establishing a buddy system of support can be valuable. Roles can include peer support in lessons, noting down homework, reminders about bringing sports kit, providing support for group work etc – peer buddies can provide great support.

**Some general strategies for teachers**

It’s important to remember that every child with ASD is unique and will respond in different ways. If an assistant supports the child, teachers should find out from them exactly which conditions are most conducive to learning and good behaviour. In addition, teachers can help by:

* Having a clear structure to the lesson. This includes explaining exactly what is going to happen.
* Minimising disruption to routine – always talk through any known changes well in advance so that the child can be prepared.
* Organising the classroom with clearly defined areas and making it clear what these are.
* Remembering that the child with ASD may not understand facial expression and figurative language. This can be a particular problem in senior school where teachers are relaxed with their classes and share jokes with them. Sarcasm and use of idiom are not understood. Explain clearly and concisely in ‘black and white’ terms.
* Referring to the child by name – s/he may not understand that ‘everyone’ includes them.
* Using concrete apparatus and visual signs/symbols to back up verbal and written instructions.
* Being clear and firm about behaviour and applying rules consistently.
* Making use of ICT – computers are not demanding emotionally, as people often are, and can allow the child with ASD to ‘rest’ from the demands and pitfalls of social interaction.