



## Autism Association of the ACT Inc

Postal: S.H.O.U.T, PO Box 717, Mawson, ACT, 2607  
Telephone: (02) 6290 1984 Facsimile: 02 6286 4475  
Email: [autism@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:autism@coombs.anu.edu.au) Internet: <http://autism.anu.edu.au/>

## Effective Teaching Of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

### What Is Autism?

- Autism is believed to result from problems in the way a person's central nervous system functions, in particular how it processes and organises information
- The causes of autism are not known for certain and there are many theories. There does not appear to be a single cause. What is true, however, is that the style of parenting used for raising and managing children does not cause autism.
- Autism is life-long. There is no cure, although with early diagnosis, appropriate therapy and educational programs, it is possible in many cases to make significant progress.

### Good Educational Practice

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) do not learn in the same way as other children. ASD children require well-designed and structured programs tailored to the child's individual needs. These programs must recognize and use the child's particular way of learning. They must be delivered by teachers, therapists and other educators who are aware of the special characteristics of this disability and the special needs of the particular child. Merely delivering the standard year-age curriculum in a different manner is inappropriate and poor educational practice.

### Learning characteristics of ASD children

1. The child with autism does not automatically look for or easily see a structure in the world around them. They are disorganised in space and time. They learn best in a structured environment that has few distractions. However, what may be a distraction to one child (eg a ticking clock) will not be a distraction to another child. Teachers, therapists and parents have to identify the things that each child finds distracting.
2. The child with autism tends to memorize a sequence of events instead of learning the concept being taught.
3. The child with autism tends to learn by rote, without understanding clearly the material.
4. The child with autism does not naturally integrate or generalise information.
5. The child with autism lacks typical social interaction skills, including initiating and signalling needs.
6. The child with autism is very literal and concrete in his understanding and use of language concepts.
7. The child with autism does not automatically learn to imitate.
8. The child with autism is more disrupted or enhanced by subtle environmental conditions. For example, the ticking of a clock, the buzz of lights or the hum of a heater.
9. The child with autism tends to learn visually and when he can "see the whole thing", the beginning, the middle and the end
10. The child with autism has difficulty in screening out irrelevant stimuli and focussing on the essential information (tunes in and out).

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## Areas of impairment

Autistic people have a significant impairment in three specific areas of their development:

**1. Communication** - People with autism have significant difficulties communicating. The type and extent of difficulties varies widely. Autistic people have difficulty expressing themselves and understanding what other people say and mean, especially more abstract concepts. While some autistic people can speak fairly well, others may have a very limited ability to speak despite having normal intelligence. Learning at school will be impeded unless the type and extent of the communication difficulties are identified and strategies tailored to the specific needs of the child are used to help the child understand instructions and to learn.

**2. Social Skills** - People with autism have significant difficulties forming relationships. Autistic people struggle to understand social rules governing relationships and interactions, rules that everyone else takes for granted. As a result, they can be unresponsive to or rejecting of attempts by others to interact with them. If no adult help is given, an autistic child remains isolated from other people, because other children give up trying to initiate interactions and play, both in the classroom and playground.

**3. Flexible Behaviour** - People with autism have very inflexible behaviour and a very restricted range of interests and activities. They like to follow exact daily routines. They may be very attached to seemingly ordinary objects, such as stones, and insist that these be always carried with them. The same body movement may be repeated over and over again (eg finger flicking), or objects may be used in a narrow way (eg lining up pencils). When these obsessional activities or routines are unexpectedly interrupted or changed, a child can become very distressed. Educational programs must take this into account and work to diminish the child's obsession with the more disruptive behaviours and encourage the child to be more flexible in those areas in which progress can be made.

## And what it means...

For people with autism the everyday world may be unpredictable and frightening. As a result, autistic people of all ages may become anxious or distressed and display behaviour that is difficult to manage. For example,

*Abnormal response to sensory stimulation:* People with ASD may be distressed by various sounds, sights, tastes, smells and touch sensations. Alternatively, they may fail to recognise and cue into normal sensations such as their teacher's voice. Examples include:

- sounds can be distressing and difficult to relate to their origin (e.g. a person's voice talking at a certain pitch or the sound of the school siren);
- smells and tastes that are acceptable to other people may be objectionable to a child with autism
- proximity to others can be stressful (eg sitting on a crowded mat, a teacher leaning over to correct work or an unexpected touch from another child); and
- flashing lights may cause great distress.

*Abnormalities in eating:* Children may have very restricted diets despite efforts by parents and professionals to introduce new and varied foods.

*Disturbed sleep patterns:* Children may have difficulty sleeping. This may have a considerable effect on family sleep patterns and also on the child's capacity to focus when at school.

*Distorted perception of danger.* Children may not recognise the danger associated with traffic, electricity, heaters, fans and other similar situations or objects.

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## **The Autism Association of the ACT, Inc**

The Autism Association is a voluntary organisation. It works to improve the life and opportunities for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, their families and their carers. The Association is a non-profit charitable organisation. All Donations to the Association are tax deductible.

The Association provides:

- Support to people who have ASD, their families, carers, teachers and therapists;
- Information on autism;, on living with ASD, and Information on the services available in the ACT;
- Advocacy to improve services and opportunities;
- Close work with service providers to improve service delivery;
- Seminars and workshops and information forums;
- A newsletter, "Autism Awareness";
- Monthly meetings and speakers.

Membership of the Association is open to any person with ASD, their family, carers, teachers or other interested person. If you would like to join the Association or attend our meetings or assist in any other way, please contact us at the SHOUT offices.

## **Contact Details:**

SHOUT Offices

PO Box 717

Mawson ACT 2067

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Internet: <http://autism.anu.edu.au>