

Autism Spectrum Disorder: Support Strategies.

What is ASD?

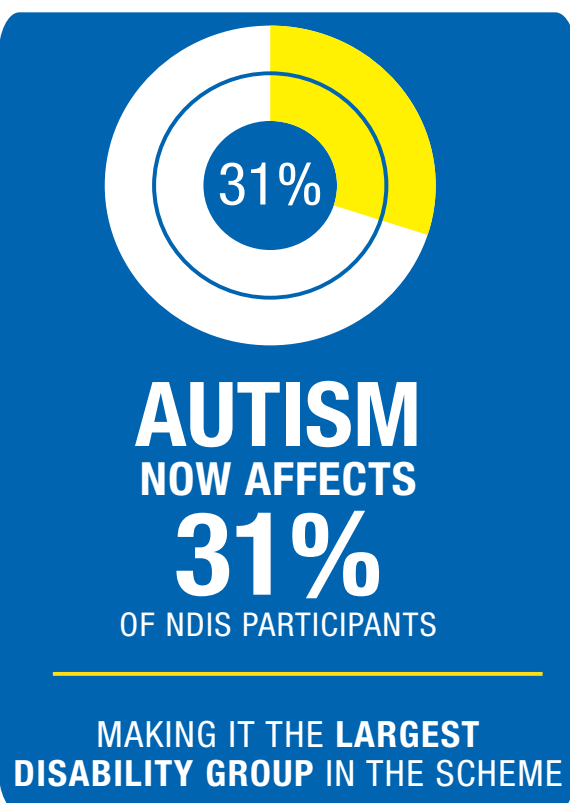
Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is a term used to describe a lifelong condition that affects a person's development throughout their lifespan. Social communication, social interaction and restricted, repetitive behaviours are the main areas of difference from people without ASD. The term 'spectrum' indicates that no two people with ASD are the same. Differences depend on combinations of social ability, communication level, cognitive ability, age, personality and many other factors.

What causes ASD?

There is no known single cause for ASD, but it is generally accepted that it is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function. Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in children with autism compared to neurotypical children.

How common is ASD?

The number of people who are diagnosed with ASD continues to rise in Australia. Autism, once considered rare, now affects 31% of NDIS participants.



ASD Support Strategies

How Can Communication Be Supported?

Communication involves a range of challenges for people with ASD, including the intake and processing of information, verbal abilities and reading and writing skills. Picking up on nonverbal cues, body language and subtle intent, intonation, and interpretation are also difficult for individuals with ASD. Supporting communication challenges is essential to assisting someone with autism to understand, as well as to express their needs, wants, opinions, knowledge and feelings.

- Use clear and simple language: Leave pauses and waiting time in between sentences and phrases.
- Communicate one idea at a time. Do this by breaking up ideas into sentences with pauses in between.
- List tasks in sequential order and support with visual information to allow for tasks to be processed more easily.
- State your message clearly and avoid language that may imply meaning.
- Avoid ambiguous language such as metaphors, similes, and idioms as these can be taken literally.
- Avoid giving instructions by asking a question (e.g. "Please pick up your toys" instead of "Can you pick up your toys?")
- Speak in a normal tone of voice with a slightly slower speed and plenty of pauses.
- Limit open-ended questions and offer specific choices.

- Use visual aids to support communication such as a pictorial or written checklist of the steps required to complete a task like dressing or toileting, schedules, “first - then” cards.

Encouraging Positive Behaviour

Each individual on the autism spectrum has differences in their behaviour. These may vary from repetitive physical movements to aggression and destructive behaviours that are often the result of frustration or pain. Obsessions, inflexibility, adherence to seemingly non-functional routines, adherence to rules, literal thought patterns, and resistance to change are all examples of common behavioural manifestations, as well as associated anxiety, frustration and disorganisation that often present in an individual with autism’s life. While many of these behaviours can be disruptive to learning or interaction, it is critical to seek to understand their causes. Instead of only thinking of the elimination and remediation of a behaviour, it is often helpful to consider the support strategies to help manage these behaviours.

- Recognise behaviour as communication. Seek to understand intent and build alternate mode of communication.
- Think preventatively and proactively.
- Develop an individualised positive behaviour support plan.
- Provide behaviour-specific feedback and give ample praise and reinforcement.
- Communicate expectations, use daily and short term schedules, warn of changes to routines or unexpected events.
- Offer choices and provide the person some control (e.g. ‘Which one should we work on first, math or reading?’).
- Respect the person’s personal space and teach them to recognise and respect the personal space of others.

- Give the person opportunities to express emotions, confusion or their perspective.
- Teach and provide the person with a list of strategies for calming when anxious, stressed or angry.
- While they are occurring, ignore behaviours that are intended to gain attention. Employ redirection strategies instead. Teach alternative behaviours. (e.g. how to get someone’s attention with a gentle tap on the shoulder) at another time.



Supporting social skills

The desire to interact with others is can be quite strong for individuals with autism, but the processes that allow for social interaction can be overwhelming that they do not know where to begin. Recognise that a person with autism is likely to have anxiety before, during and after social situations, which can result in avoidance or inappropriate behaviours.

- Welcome the person and make that they are a valued part of a group or activity.
- Get to know the person and meet them where they currently are in terms of both social skills and interests.
- Appropriate social behaviour requires social understanding; be aware of the need to build foundations.
- Be aware that free play and other unstructured times are the most difficult times for children with autism; think about how to give structure to activities.

- Focus on social development in areas of interest and competence for the student.
- Teach context clues and referencing those around you (e.g. If everyone else is standing, you should be too!)
- Break social skills into small component parts, and teach skills through supported interactions.
- Reinforce what the person does well socially – use behaviour-specific praise and concrete reinforcement.
- Celebrate strengths. Many individuals with autism have a good sense of humour, a love of or affinity for music, strong rote memorisation skills, or a heightened sense of visual perspective. Use these to motivate interest or social inclusion.
- Provide a safe place and teach when to use it. A calming room or corner, and/or objects or activities that help to calm providers opportunities to regroup and can be helpful in teaching self-control.
- Remove or dampen distracting or distributing stimuli. Replace flickering fluorescent lights, use headphones to help block noise, avoid high traffic times, ect.
- Pair companions or staff appropriately for challenging activities or times. Some people are more calming than others in certain situations. If going shopping with with one parent works better than the other, focus on that and celebrate successes.
- Consider structural changes to home surroundings. structural changes to home surroundings. These changes might address some of the specifics of your situation to increase independence or reduce the risks when outbursts occur.

Adapt the Environment

Your observations are likely to show that behaviour occurs at specific times, with certain people or in particular environments. Changing the environment can often reduce behavioural episodes. Expand situations, relationships, places and opportunities that are successful. If possible, try to adjust or avoid situations that are triggers for challenging behaviour. Some things to consider:

- Organise and provide structure. Give clear and consistent routines so that the person knows what is coming next.
- Inform transitions and changes. Recognise that changes changes can be extremely unsettling, especially when they are unexpected. Refer to a schedule, use countdown timers, give warnings about upcoming changes, ect.

Did you know?

1/100 Australian Children (That's a population of 230,000) have Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Autism affects almost four times as many boys than girls.

Useful links

To find out more, check these useful resources:

- www.autismspectrum.org.au
- www.amaze.org.au
- www.ndp.org.au/positive-behaviour-support



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