

The term autism is used to describe any of a wide range of disorders on what is known as the autistic spectrum. Autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a range of related developmental disorders that begin in childhood and persist throughout adulthood. It is thought that ASD is not caused by one single factor but rather a combination of genetic and environmental factors. There are believed to be about half a million people in the UK affected by autism.

Asperger syndrome

At one end of the autistic spectrum will be the child with severe autism and profound learning difficulties and at the other, children of average to above average intelligence and milder autism, known as Asperger syndrome. Children with Asperger syndrome have fewer problems with speech than those with more severe autism, but will still have difficulties understanding and processing language. Many will be in mainstream schools and are more likely to attend mainstream sports clubs.

The effects of autistic spectrum disorders can be grouped into three broad categories:

- challenges and difficulties with social interaction – how an individual gets on with other people
- difficulties with social communication – in using language and communicating with others
- problems in making sense of their world – social imagination.

Social interaction – getting on with other people

People with autism often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings and expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially. They may:

- not understand the unwritten social rules that most of us pick up without thinking: they may stand too close to another person for example, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation
- appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- prefer to spend time alone rather than seeking out the company of other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- appear to behave “strangely” or inappropriately, as it is not always easy for them to express feelings, emotions or needs.

Difficulties with social interaction can mean that people with autism find it hard to form friendships: some may want to interact with other people and make friends, but may be unsure how to go about this.

Social communication

Some people with autism may not speak, or have fairly limited speech. They will usually understand what other people say to them, but prefer to use alternative means of communication themselves, such as sign language or visual symbols.

Others will have good language skills, but they may still find it hard to understand the give-and-take nature of conversations, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said (this is known as echolalia) or talking at length about their own interests.

It helps if other people speak in a clear, consistent way and give people with autism time to process what has been said to them.

People with autism have difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal language. Many have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say. They can find it difficult to use or understand:

- facial expressions or tone of voice
- jokes and sarcasm
- common phrases and sayings; an example might be the phrase “It’s cool”, which people often say when they think that something is good, but strictly speaking, means that it’s a bit cold.

Making sense of the world – social imagination

Social imagination allows us to understand and predict other people’s behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. Difficulties with social imagination mean that people with autism find it hard to:

- understand and interpret other people’s thoughts, feelings and actions
- predict what will happen next, or what could happen next
- understand the concept of danger, for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- engage in imaginative play; children with autism may enjoy some imaginative play but prefer to act out the same scenes each time
- prepare for change and plan for the future
- cope in new or unfamiliar situations.

Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination. Many people with autism are very creative and may be, for example, accomplished artists, musicians or writers.

The characteristics of autism vary from one person to another but, as well as the **three main areas of difficulty**, people with autism may have:

- love of routines
- sensory sensitivity
- special interests
- learning disabilities.

The information above has been obtained from the National Autistic Society website.

Coaching ideas

- Talk to the parents! This is vital as they will know the intricate details of their child’s behaviours, and can help you predict and prevent behavioural outbursts, and avoid situations that may cause distress. You may want to ask the parent to stay for the duration of the session/class until you get to know the child.
- Be flexible. Although two children may have the same diagnosis, their strengths and difficulties can be widely different.
- Prepare them for any changes well in advance. This may include class cancellations, the introduction of a new coach or a change in session routine.
- Try to refer to the child by name as they may not realise that certain instructions are meant for them.
- Be precise with instructions. Keep them short and simple.

- Children with autism are often visual learners, so be sure to demonstrate the exercise as well as describing it, even if you feel it is a technique with which the student is familiar.
- Acknowledge the need for personal space and try to space children out where possible.
- Be aware that the child may be oversensitive to certain conditions, such as lighting or excessive noise. This may cause distress or disruptive behaviours. Parents will be able to inform you of any particular sensitivities.
- Some children may have an unusually high or low pain threshold and this should be taken into account when doing certain exercises.
- Ensure the child knows the club rules and the consequences for breaking them. Some students with autism will thrive on rules while others will be resistant to them or take them very literally and become upset if certain behaviours do not result in certain consequences in every case for every student.
- The child may need a “time out” if they become distressed or overwhelmed. Make sure the child knows where this is and how to let you know if they need to use it. Parents will inform you if they feel this is necessary.
- Partner work may be particularly problematic due to the peer relation difficulties experienced by students with autism. They are often unpopular partners: due to their “unusual” behaviours and may be bullied by other students; they may adhere strictly to instructions which cause friction with their partner.
- Where possible, pair with an older or more mature child who may be more patient with them but be aware that this child may become frustrated if they are selected to be the partner every time.
- Sports that involve contact or sparring can also prove difficult as the child may perceive an accidentally forceful technique as a deliberate attack and may respond with aggression or distress. They may also hold a grudge against the offending child and may begin to perceive other meaningless events as hostile.
- If the child finds eye contact uncomfortable, DO NOT force them to look at you or at other children.
- Introduce only one skill at a time and be sure to repeat things frequently.
- Some children with autism may have excellent rote memory, which can be used to their advantage when learning patterns.
- Above all, be patient, positive and calm!

Acknowledgements

Taekwondo Association of Northern Ireland (TANI)

The National Autistic Society

Additional resources

More information about autism can be found on the National Autistic Society website: www.nas.org.uk

