Communication and social interaction

Surrey Autism Partnership Board

Introduction

Most people with an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) will have some difficulties communicating with and understanding other people. People often need to learn to communicate with others socially - it doesn't come naturally as it does for most people.

Zach's communication is different to his friends from college:

Zach often feels left out

- He often doesn't understand the jokes his friends tell and takes them literally.

- He can keep talking about a subject he's passionate about without noticing others want to move on.

- He also finds it hard to judge the right moment to speak in a group without interrupting others.

Zach's friends support him

Zach's friends accept he can be a bit different:

- They understand he doesn't always see the point of 'hanging out' and doesn't do 'small talk'.

- They understand that he can't always keep up with a group conversation when everyone is talking.

Accurate language is easier to understand.

People with an ASC often need to 'work out' the meaning of the language people use. Some language is harder to 'work out'.
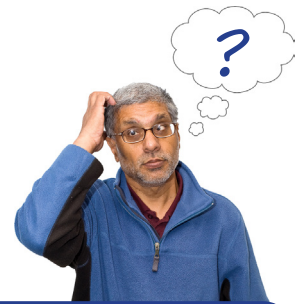
What might you say to someone who has played a trick on you?

|		
Accurate	You tricked me, that wasn't nice	**Easier**
Simile	You are sly like a fox	↕
Metaphor	You are a sly old fox	
Sarcasm	You're clearly a nice guy !	**Harder**

People often learn to 'work out' similes and metaphors.

Ironic and sarcastic phrases are the hardest to work out as the message is in the tone and body language rather than the words used.

Idioms like 'that put the cat amongst the pigeons' can be confusing and hard to work out.

People may interpret language very literally.

This can happen in conversation and also in written information.
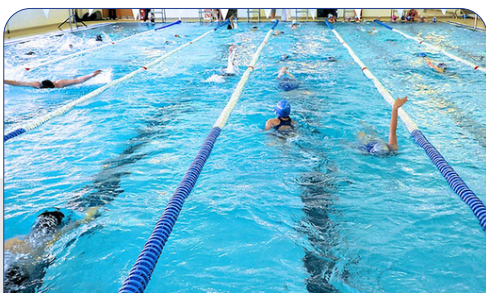
Howard swims at his local pool

The sign at the pool said 'Lane Swimming 2pm to 4pm'

The first time Howard went lane swimming he swam in a lane from 2pm to 4pm.

Afterwards he was exhausted and felt sick.

Many people with an ASC tend to be frank, honest and matter of fact

Some people may struggle to imagine how the other person feels and not 'filter' what they say before they say it.
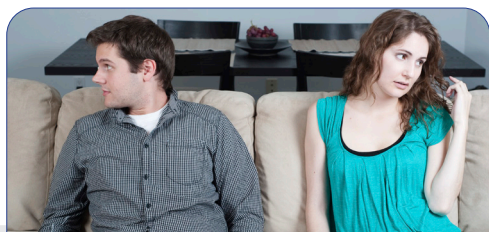
Tina goes shopping with her sister

Tina's sister Julie can be very blunt.

Julie always gives an honest opinion about the clothes Tina tries on when they go shopping.

Tina tried on a pair of jeans once and Julie said 'They don't suit you because you've got fat legs'.

Other people may be very cautious about what they say for fear of making mistakes or upsetting others.

Harry often feels awkward

Harry can seem very shy and sometimes comes across as rude or aloof.

He can get so anxious about saying the wrong thing that he can end up not saying anything in a social situation.

The unwritten social rules can be confusing.

For example a young person with an ASC may not realise that they could look threatening when wearing their hoodie in a shop. They may not intuitively understand these kinds of social rules.

When a person is in a pressured situation, such as being questioned by the Police, they may avoid eye contact and become agitated. They may not be aware of how these behaviours are interpreted by others.

Carrying an Autism Alert card are be a useful way of letting others know why they may be finding a situation difficult.

Non-verbal communication – body language, tone of voice and facial expressions.

People often struggle to interpret non-verbal communication, or view it as less important as the spoken word.

Some people with an ASC may find eye contact uncomfortable which can lead to missing important non verbal clues.

Tone of voice and body language is often as important as the words

I'm fine thank you

John is feeling happy and well

I'm fine thank you

John is in a bad mood

People with ASC are more likely to take the words literally and miss the non verbal clues. People often learn to 'work out' non verbal clues, but it's not intuitive for them.

People can misread situations and make 'social mistakes'.

For example if a person keeps talking to John, who says he's fine, without realising he's in a bad mood this could cause conflict.

Many people with an ASC find email and social media useful methods of communication.

Liam keeps in touch via facebook
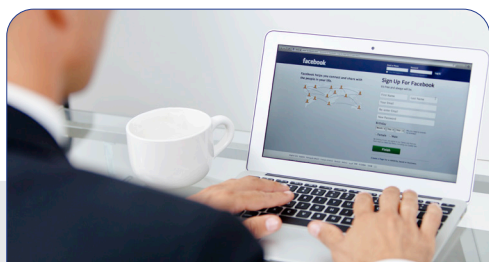
Liam prefers using Facebook to making phonecalls or texting.

He can read messages and process them in his own time rather than having to respond in real time.

He will often edit his messages before sending them.

Don't talk too fast and do give people time.

It may take people longer to process information as they work out the meaning of what's been said during a conversation.

Many people prefer one to one conversations.

Trying to follow a group conversation can be exhausting as by the time they've processed what one person has said the conversation has moved on and they've lost track.

Some people with ASC may understand language at a lower level than the way they speak. They can seem to understand what you've said when they don't.

Check that people have understood your meaning.

Try to avoid noisy, busy environments.

People may find it hard to concentrate on a conversation in an environment that has a lot of sensory distractions, such as other people talking or music playing.

Many people with an ASC can easily find their senses being overloaded by background stimulation that most other people don't really notice.

People may need support to make choices.

People may struggle to imagine something they haven't done before.
Making a choice in itself can be a very stressful situation for someone with an ASC.

People with an ASC can be very anxious about trying new things and need support to make informed choices.

People may not want to try things that they are likely to enjoy and stick to things they know.

Apps.

More and more people with ASC are using ipads and other tablets to help with communication. New apps are being developed all the time.

Not all apps are free to download. Some apps offer a free basic version but you need to pay for the full version.

Visual communication can help.

Writing things down for people is likely to be very helpful - for example lists of tasks that need doing. For some people using pictures with words helps even more.

Written information is permanent and can be referred to again and again. When people are anxious they may often keep asking the same question again and again seeking reassurance.

It's important that people can 'be themselves'.

Constantly trying to fit into a world where most people communicate in a different way to you can be exhausting.

There are social groups and conferences for people with an ASC, Many people find they can relax, be themselves and not worry about trying to 'fit in' in these environments.

It can be a huge relief to spend time with people who are more predictable, and don't mind if you're not feeling sociable or don't want to make small talk.

People often meet others who share their interests.

People with a Learning Disability and Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC).

The term 'learning disability' is used to describe people with a wide variety of needs.

Some people may be living independently, others may need support 24 hrs a day.

People will have very different communication needs.

Aran understands most words but gets confused if people use too many long words and jargon.

Lydia has a small vocabulary and may only understand 2 or 3 key words in a sentence

Some people with a learning disability may use other forms of communication in place of, or to support their speech.

Pictures and Symbols.

Pictures and symbols can be used in lots of different ways to help people to communicate their needs. Using pictures and symbols tends to encourage verbal communication.

cheese

Some people have a communication aid developed for them by a Speech and Language Therapist.

The aid may be electronic or a low tech aid like a key ring or laminated picture book.

Useful websites

- www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com
- www.mayer-johnson.com
- www.widgit.com

Makaton.

Many people with ASC who have a learning disability use Makaton.

Makaton is a language programme using signs and symbols to help people to communicate. It is designed to support spoken language and the signs and symbols are used with speech, in spoken word order.

Pauline does not communicate verbally. She uses Makaton signs to communicate her needs.

Pauline uses one sign at a time rather than signing sentences.

If you would like more information about or to learn to use Makaton, contact The Makaton Charity:

Website: www.makaton.org   Email: info@makaton.org   Phone: 01276 606760

Communication Passports.

A communication passport is a booklet designed for a person who cannot easily speak for themselves.

It helps other people understand their needs and how they communicate.

A passport presents the person positively, reflecting their character and often includes:

- photos of important people and activities
- important events in their life
- their likes and dislikes.

Speech and Language Therapists can help to design a passport.

Useful website

- www.communicationpassports.org.uk

Intensive Interaction.

Intensive interaction is an approach to teaching the pre-speech fundamentals of communication to people who are still at an early stage of communication development.

The only equipment needed is a sensitive person to be the interaction partner.

The approach works by progressively developing enjoyable and relaxed interaction sequences between the interaction partner and the person doing the learning.

Useful websites

- www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk

- www.usinabus.org.uk

Useful websites

www.autism.org.uk

- The website of the National Autistic Society.

www.nassurreybranch.org

- The website of the National Autistic Society Surrey branch.

www.surreypb.org.uk

- The website of the Surrey Autism Partnership Board. Click the Surrey Autism Partnership Board logo on the home page of the learning disability partnership board site to go to our pages.

There are seven factsheets in our series about Autism Spectrum Conditions.

You can download our factsheets from www.surreypb.org.uk

This is the website of the Learning Disability and Surrey Autism Partnership Board

1. Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) - An Introduction
2. Diagnosis
3. Communication
4. Useful strategies for life
5. Social care and community life
6. Health services and support
7. Our stories - three stories from people with ASC

Credits

This factsheet was developed by Howard Childs, Tom Moore and Mike Leat.

The developers would like to thank The Surrey Autism Partnership Board, Surrey County Council, Surrey & Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, Assist through the National Autistic Society and The Smart Enterprise.

Design by Mike Leat of The Clear Communication People Ltd   Version 2 - July 2015 (reviewed April 2021)