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Podcast *Incredible Conversation*: for adults supporting young people <https://bit.ly/incredibleconversation>

WHAT IS AUTISM? People with a diagnosis of autism see, hear and feel the world in a different way from other people. Autism is a spectrum condition, which means that people present with varying degrees of difficulty. Asperger syndrome is a term that is no longer used as it has been dropped from the diagnostic category, but it used to refer to people who presented with difficulties with social communication but who have particular strengths with language. The term 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD) is now used for everyone. All people with ASD share certain core difficulties as outlined below, but autism affects people in very different ways. This means that two people with the same diagnosis can have a very different set of strengths and challenges. A high percentage of people with ASD have additional learning difficulties such as dyslexia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

WHAT CAUSES AUTISM? The exact cause is unknown. However, research suggests that there is a strong genetic influence on autism meaning that this way of seeing and experiencing the world tends to run in families. Autism is not caused by the person's upbringing, life experiences, diet or medical treatments. A diagnosis of ASD is no-one's fault.

AUTISM DIAGNOSIS - Characteristics vary from one person to another. However, in order to receive a diagnosis, individuals will be experiencing difficulties in three main areas as shown in the table below.

1. Social communication	2. Difficulty with social interaction	3. Restricted & repetitive behaviours & interests
Autistic people may have difficulty in being aware of other people's emotions, or expressing their own feelings. This can make it really hard for them to find their way in the social world. They may appear insensitive, may isolate themselves as they feel overwhelmed by being with others, they may not seek comfort or support from those around them in the same way as others. As a result, their behaviour may seem "inappropriate" to others. People with autism may struggle to form and maintain friendships. Despite wanting to make friends, they may feel unsure how to go about it.	People with autism may struggle to interpret language and non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures). Often, they will have a very literal way of understanding language. They may find it difficult to understand facial expressions, tone of voice, jokes and sarcasm. Others may have good language skills, but may still struggle to manage the expectations of a conversation. For example, they may talk about only their own interests.	For people with autism, the world can seem like a confusing place due to the unpredictability of a social system that does not always abide by strict rules. They often prefer to have a predictable daily routine where the rules are clearer. These rules can be rigid and it can be difficult for the person with autism to adjust when things change. Many people may also have an intense interest, which can vary from art, trains to computers. For girls the interests can be related to the social world, which they are trying to work out.

<p>What helps: Find opportunities to discuss what other people might be thinking or feeling, what they might want or what they might have intended, e.g. in TV programmes, in books. Try not to get cross when the person get things wrong but use the error as a teaching opportunity.</p>	<p>What helps: It is useful if people speak in a clear and consistent way to people with autism. This gives the person with autism time to process what has been said to them. If their communication or understanding is a problem, find a time to discuss this with them when emotions are calm. Try to 'teach' them how others might experience their communication.</p>	<p>What helps: Although change can be difficult, if it is prepared for in advance, the person with autism may be more able to cope. Encourage them to pursue their interests, as this is fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.</p>
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SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS - ASD describes the way an individual sees the world and there are no "cures". However support can improve skills and improve wellbeing and quality of life. The aim of intervention is not to change autism *per se*, but to reduce aspects of autism that are most functionally impairing to enable the child or young person to become more integrated and cope better with life.

Working with parents and teachers - Once a child gets a diagnosis of ASD, adults around the young person should get together to think of ways to help the child's functioning so that their difficulties have the least negative impact on their lives. This may mean making small adjustments to home and school life such as offering predictability, giving breaks where necessary and changing other environmental expectations to enable to child or young person to cope better.

Early intervention - Early intervention can be helpful at targeting the core features of ASD. There are many different approaches including Applied Behaviour Analysis and TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped Children) with varying degrees of success. See the Research autism website (below) for details of the programmes and outcomes.

Therapies for older children - In older children talking therapies can help people with ASD and their families cope with particular situations and experiences. While there are programmes that aim to teach social skills in either individual or group settings, these skills are notoriously hard for young people with ASD to use in a wide range of day to day life situations. Often a more powerful form of intervention is to train parents and teachers in ways to reinforce social rules throughout the day so the child learns. Cognitive Behavioural therapy for anxiety has been adapted to work with children with ASD with some success.

Social stories™ - Social stories are a way to help people on the autism spectrum develop greater social understanding. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. See Social Stories by Carol Gray for further information: <http://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/>

FAMILY LIFE - Autism can be a real challenge for the individual and those around them. Understanding the experiences of children with ASD can help enormously. The Hanen Programme is a parenting programme specifically to help parents increase the social communication opportunities for children in the home.

COMMON CHALLENGES - Key areas to support in children with ASD are outlined below.

Support social relationships	Teach the child about theirs and other people's emotions	Sensitivities to the environment
Take an active role in thinking about your child's social relationships by being proactive in arranging and supporting play dates for them. When things go wrong, help them to understand the other person's point of view and a different way to manage next time.	Help children to understand and notice their emotions and to understand that feelings link to behaviour. Spend time noticing emotional behaviours in others with them to help increase their 'social thinking'.	Children with ASD are often either hyposensitive (under sensitive) to sensory input in the environment, or hypersensitive (over sensitive). Be aware of potential for them being overwhelmed when out and about.

Further resources

National Autistic Society: <http://www.autism.org.uk/>. A national organisation that offers information and support for people affected by autism. Or the US equivalent Autism Speaks <https://www.autismspeaks.org>

The **Research Autism** website has a good review of interventions: <http://researchautism.net>. Look up an intervention here to see if there is any evidence that it works.

Social Thinking: <https://socialthinking.com> This is an American organisation which aims to develop ideas about not just teaching children social skills but developing their understanding of how to "think socially" too and the importance of it.

The Literacy Shed: www.literacyshed.com/amazingautism This website has many resources to teach literacy to children but also has a great video explaining ASD to the non-Autistic person.