



"Autism & Difficulties in The School Environment" © by Planet Autism

The Types of Difficulties Autistics Will Have

- being bullied;
- bullying others (*sometimes this can happen due to difficulties understanding social boundaries & low empathy*);
- inability to cope with distressing curriculum content;
- sensory - noise and chaos (*e.g. from disruptive classrooms, canteen and playgrounds*);
- organisational difficulties due to executive dysfunction;
- misunderstanding teachers' instructions;
- speaking up when in need of help;
- socialising with peers/friendships;
- mental health (*e.g. anxiety or depression*) impacting access to learning;
- disruptive behaviour (*more common in males*).

Bullying from peers (in and out of school)

Rates of bullying of autistic children are very high, polls vary, but rates have been cited as high as 82% (Rowley et al 2012 and Bancroft 2012), which is staggering.

Surveys on websites such as Autism Speaks and IAN put it at 63%, that's still a massive amount. This study puts it lower at 46% but this is likely very unrepresentative of the reality:

<http://healthland.time.com/2012/09/05/why-autistic-kids-make-easy-targets-for-school-bullies/>

"A new study finds that children with autism spectrum disorders are bullied far more often than their typically developing peers — nearly five times as often — but parents of autistic kids think the rate is even higher than that.

In the study, about 46% of autistic children in middle and high school told their parents they were victimized at school within the previous year, compared with just over 10% of children in the general population. Calling it a “profound public health problem,” lead author Paul Sterzing of Washington University in St. Louis told the New York Times that the “rate of bullying and victimization among these adolescents is alarmingly high.”

However, there is then this rider:

*"Parents of autistic children think that the true rates of victimization **are far higher than what the study found**, and that the rates of perpetrating bullying are lower, precisely because autism disorders are characterized by an inability to read subtle social cues and by difficulty with communication. In order to report being bullied, you need to understand when you're being targeted, for example; in contrast, you also need to understand and effectively deploy harassing social information in order to be a bully — things that autistic children generally cannot do."*

As part of bullying, there can be the more insidious trickery and using for negative purposes, whereby peers pretend to be the autistic child's friend, to then subject them to all manner of surreptitious abuses:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3158777/Shocking-rise-mate-crime-children-autism-Asperger-s-bullied-abused-robbed-called-friends.html>

“Nearly 90% of teens with autism subjected to 'mate crime' says [new study](#)

'The overall picture our survey paints is one of heightened vulnerability amongst people with autism and Asperger's syndrome to an insidious, hidden form of crime,' the report stated.

'Often, the person with autism is unaware that what they consider friendship is potentially an abusive relationship. It is the parents and carers who recognise the issue but then struggle to find the right way to provide support to the individual.'

The most vulnerable age group was 16 to 25 in which every respondent said they struggled to distinguish genuine friends from those who may bully or abuse them.”

[Autistics as Bullies](#)

Autistics can, through low empathy or difficulties with recognising and understanding social boundaries, bully others themselves. Although it has to be remembered that in some cases, they may not understand that what they are doing is unacceptable and there may not be ill-intent. It could also be as a result of mimicking the unacceptable behaviour of non-autistic peers. Other times, it may be a way of releasing the stress from the bullying they themselves are suffering. Autistics can also have co-morbid conditions (including ADHD, schizophrenia, bipolar, anxiety, depression etc.) all of which could contribute to challenging behaviour causing bullying. And let's not forget, autistics also have their own personalities and can be impacted by the environment they are growing up in and life experiences, the same as everybody else, which can also affect behaviour.

<http://healthland.time.com/2012/09/05/why-autistic-kids-make-easy-targets-for-school-bullies/>

"About 15% of autistic children were reported to be bullies themselves — roughly the same rate as in the general teen population — and 9% were both bullies and victims."

There is guidance on what schools should do about the bullying of autistics here: **"Bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorders: guidance for teachers and other professionals SEN and disability: developing effective anti-bullying practice"** <http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/media/5397/asds-and-bulltubg-module-final.pdf>

If your autistic child is the bully, try PECS-style social stories to educate them about the inappropriateness of bullying and teach them about how it affects the victim. Find out if they have copied the behaviour and if necessary, seek psychological therapy for any factor to do with mental health that could be behind it.

[Inability to Cope with Distressing Curriculum Content](#)

The national curriculum these days seems to be including more and more graphic content and exposing children to very adult topics. I have my theories on this. I do believe there is an [agenda to sexualise children](#) more and more, the moment they start secondary school (sometimes before) they are being referred to as "young people" – a really silly term (a baby is a 'person', but it's still a baby and by definition, isn't then 'old person' an ageist and somewhat arbitrary term?). There is a moral decline in society, which seems to want to make children as adult as possible, as early as possible. This [decay in morals](#) in society is all around us, but we become immune to so much, precisely because it is around us at every turn. The stages in the national curriculum are defined by the Government as "age-appropriate", but children are not all the same at the same age, children are individuals. What is around us everywhere isn't the barometer of what is right! Why do children need to learn about horrific topics so young? Childhood is such a fleeting moment. There is time aplenty to gradually be exposed in early adulthood and it especially doesn't need to be thrust upon our most vulnerable children. So when a school is for instance, showing the brutal film "[Amistad](#)" to 12/13 year old children and your autistic child is traumatised, you are right to speak up about this. Or when they are showing those children a modern version of "[Romeo & Juliet](#)" with an abusive father and poisoning deaths aplenty, your child is being emotionally abused! Isn't that now outlawed in the UK? Social services remove children from parents for it.

That child might be playing with dolls and teddies at home and go to school and have the most terrible

realities thrust upon them.

Education seeks to remove parental rights to exercise expertise in our own children, as to when they are **ready** to learn certain topics. It's a one-size-fits-all approach. The trouble is, one size definitely does not fit all. Autistic children are known to be approximately 3-4 years behind (or at $\frac{2}{3}$ of) their chronological age, developmentally, socially and emotionally. So to thrust these topics at such a child just because the national curriculum for their chronological age says you should, is detrimental and sometimes traumatising to them. Going from the relative innocence of primary school to secondary is very hard on autistics who are not ready for these topics. And you can't "get them used to it" by constantly subjecting them to it. Research backs this up:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3961758/>

*"For example, it has been shown that compared with their typically developing peers, children with ASD experience elevated stress and anxiety in both social and non-social contexts, and that **repeated exposure to stressors often amplifies the physiological stress response as opposed to attenuating it**[32,33]. This altered vulnerability to dysregulated arousal emphasizes the importance of judicious application of interventions shown to be effective for anxiety treatment in ASD, such as cognitive behavioural therapy^[34,35].*

Conclusion

*If a pattern of acute physiological arousal intensifies during the adolescent transition already shown to be more volatile, it is likely to contribute to increased risk and vulnerability. It is long established that moderate levels of arousal and stress are adaptive and even necessary for survival^[64,65]. However, **repeated, exaggerated and prolonged physiological responsivity to stressors can be deleterious** and result in pronounced dysregulation of the LHPA axis[66,67]."*

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2014/01/the-emotionally-fragile-child-on-autism.html>

"As some parents may have discovered, many young people with Asperger's (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA) are "emotionally fragile" (to coin a term). In other words, these individuals have great difficulty coping with day-to-day stressors, and exhibit unusually withdrawn or aggressive behaviors as a defense mechanism."

So there you have it, your child's brain will be damaged in the longer-term by being forced to be constantly exposed to matters which cause them distress before they are ready to cope with them. And the topics can pervade all subjects pretty much, except maths. History (*tales of violence/death/disaster/evil*), Geography (*death from natural disasters and decimation of populations through disease*), English (*no holds barred as to which texts are used*), RE (*religion contains much in the way of death/violence/evil*), science (*all sorts of topics involving death, decay, disease, danger and also the reproduction side if the child is not ready for that yet*), art (*adult themes can be used*), drama (*adult themes*), PHSE (*sex ed, ethics etc.*) and of course assemblies cover a whole host of things. It's not only the topics, it's the very graphic way these are covered, in this age of technology, with some dense teachers not thinking through the material they are using. Teachers seem to be very lax about checking age-ratings of videos before they show them – but then they are often chatting to pupils in a 'matey' peer-level way to start with (loss of authority and discipline), meaning the boundaries are blurred and it encourages a culture of anything goes.

This isn't about wrapping our children in cotton wool, it's about knowing the child and knowing the right time to drip feed things in a manner that will not traumatise them. Autistic children are different. Schools might be resistant to allowing your autistic child to withdraw from parts of lessons or assemblies which contain distressing topics. But you have the law on your side (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/notes/division/2>):

The Children and Families Act 2014

"PART 3 Children and young people in England with special educational needs or disabilities

(2) The reference in subsection (1) to the well-being of children and young people is to their well-being so far as relating to—

- (a) physical and **mental health and emotional well-being**;
- (b) **protection from abuse and neglect**;

Participating in decision making

xxv. Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013): Statutory guidance from the Department for Education which sets out what is expected of organisations and individuals to **safeguard and promote the welfare of children**.

1.24 High quality teaching that is **differentiated and personalised** will meet the individual needs of the majority of children and young people. **Some children and young people need educational provision that is additional to or different from this. This is special educational provision under Section 21 of the Children and Families Act 2014. Schools and colleges must use their best endeavours to ensure that such provision is made for those who need it.**

xix. **They must make reasonable adjustments**, including the provision of auxiliary aids and services, to ensure that disabled children and young people are not at a substantial disadvantage compared with their peers. This duty is anticipatory – it requires thought to be given in advance to what disabled children and young people might require and what adjustments might need to be made to prevent that disadvantage.

Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions (2014): statutory guidance from the Department for Education

The Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice: Protecting the vulnerable (2005)

Section 19 of the Children and Families Act 2014

1.1 Section 19 of the Children and Families Act 2014 makes clear that local authorities, in carrying out their functions under the Act in relation to disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN), must have regard to:

- **the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person, and the child's parents**
- **the importance of the child or young person, and the child's parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions**, and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions

Participating in decision making

1.3 Local authorities must ensure that children, **their parents and young people are involved** in discussions and **decisions** about their individual support and about local provision

1.7 Parents' views are important during the process of carrying out an EHC needs assessment and drawing up or reviewing an EHC plan in relation to a child. Local authorities, early years providers and schools should **enable parents to share their knowledge about their child and give them confidence that their views and contributions are valued and will be acted upon**.

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A focus on inclusive practice and removing barriers to learning

1.26 As part of its commitments under articles 7 and 24 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of young people and the progressive **removal of barriers to learning and participation** in mainstream education.

Overreaction to everyday stressors – sensory and other

It's not only curriculum content that can cause a distress response. Sensory issues can cause these too, but the point is, that autistic brains **do** react more severely to sources of distress and schools are acting in loco parentis and must meet the needs of autistic children by finding solutions. Leaving class early before the rush when the bell sounds, ear defenders, allowing work to be done in a quiet space like the library, early to lunch canteen to avoid the meleé etc.

<http://www.health24.com/Mental-Health/News/Reason-found-for-autistics-overreaction-to-stimuli-20140515>

"Certain areas in the brains of children with autism overreact to sensory stimuli, such as the touch of a scratchy sweater and loud traffic noises, a new small study shows.

The finding helps to explain why autistic kids are five times more likely than other children to be overwhelmed by everyday sensations like the whir of a fan, hot or cold temperatures, or the tastes and textures of foods."

And if there is an overreaction, this can cause a panic response:

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2013/03/aspergers-panics-attacks-disguised-as.html>

"In panic attacks that are triggered by a situation from which the Aspergers/HFA child desires to escape, he or she may make frantic efforts to escape, which are often violent – especially if parents attempt to contain the child. Often, the child suffering from panic attacks will experience significant “anticipatory anxiety” in situations where attacks have previously occurred (e.g., a child having a panic attack after the neighbor’s dog jumps up on him, resulting in the child fearing ALL dogs in ALL situations after the initial incident)."

Organisational Difficulties

Executive dysfunction is common in autism (as well as in ADHD which is often co-morbid – over 40% of autistics also have this) and it leads to difficulties with planning and organisation, focusing and timeliness.

Your child is entitled to reasonable adjustments to enable them to access their education on an equal footing with peers. If they are overwhelmed by homework, request that homework is reduced or removed, especially if your child is already doing well academically. What is the point in adding to their stress levels? The Government says it's all about early intervention with special needs, so schools must be prepared to take preventative measures like this to avoid things spiralling out of control.

Misunderstanding Teachers

Some lessons can be worse than others, lessons which deal in facts such as science and maths may be easier, but other lessons including English and RE deal in tricky concepts for many autistics. They may take things literally, or struggle with philosophical concepts, or aspects of English which involve analysing and understanding motives of characters.

Your child's teacher needs to understand this and use concrete language when explaining and if your child needs a 1:1 support in the classroom don't hold back from pointing this out. If the difficulties your child has in these areas are affecting their progress, the school should be proactive in addressing this.

[Speaking Up/Atypical Presentation](#)

The majority of autistics struggle speaking up when they need help. Even the ones that appear vocal and forthright in general, can struggle this way. It may not even be that they are reticent or fearful, it can be that it just doesn't occur to them - and a high IQ is no indicator of lack of this issue. So schools need to be aware that a quiet autistic child who looks OK on the surface, might not be. Atypical presentation of internal emotions means that there might be no obvious sign an autistic child is in distress:

<https://corticalchauvinism.com/2015/07/27/the-hidden-difficulties-of-autistic-children-in-school/>

[“What are the “small signs” of stress rising?”](#)

These will vary depending on the student. It is important to identify these subtle behavioural changes in your ASD student in order to intervene before more spectacular negative behaviours occur. Here are some behaviours you might see:

- Small “tics” and repetitive behaviours (eg. eye blinks, facial grimaces, nose or throat noises, head movements, arm or hand movements)
- Language scripting (eg. reciting language from a movie or book, apparently unrelated to the situation) – certain phrases may reliably indicate stress (eg. “Do I have to do it?”)
- Distressed or angry facial expression
- Whole body movement (eg. getting up from desk and pacing, rocking, throwing things)
- Inappropriate laughter
- Rising volume and/or tone of voice”

So a child that is struggling in school, who may be suffering much anxiety, could be laughing and looking quite happy and teachers would believe there was no problem.

Another is [flat affect](#). This means that either the child’s facial expression, or voice, or both, do not present the truth of what they are feeling inside. They could be upset, angry or again, stressed.”

School staff must recognise these traits and stop viewing autistic pupils through a neurotypical lens, or they will continue to fail to understand when an autistic child needs help!

[Socialising with Peers/Friendships](#)

This is a well-known aspect of difficulty for autistics, it's a core part of the disorder. So schools have no excuse not to be proactive in finding solutions – such as providing a social skills group, helping to pair autistic children up with buddies when they start and identifying peers who will be amenable to the child joining their group.

But teachers also need to be aware, that a significant number of autistic children (particularly girls) may be on the periphery of a social group but still excluded or struggling with joining in. Just seeing a child physically with a group of peers doesn't automatically mean they are doing OK socially.

Schools should provide an [autism trained](#) mentor member of staff, that an autistic child can seek guidance from, feel trust with and explain any socialising difficulties too, so that solutions can be sought.

Non-autistic peers can be cruel and quickly pick up on the differences of an autistic child, if they don't understand jokes, are gullible, are not operating at the "street-wise" level they are and if they are rule-bound when their peers are up to no good. Staff need to be on the lookout for an autistic child being misled, it is not uncommon for non-autistic peers to deliberately set them up to do something they don't know is wrong, that they believe their peers over and who end up holding the can when their "friends" have scarpered. Staff should think about whether that autistic child really was wrongdoing and really does deserve any consequences or telling off. A telling off can really upset an autistic child and even more so if they don't understand why they are being told off. Also a punishment that wasn't

deserved can be distressing because autistics have a strong sense of justice as a rule.

Mental Health

There are high rates of anxiety and depression among autistics, a lot of which, is because of the difficulties of existing in a neurotypically-favoured society (*the social model of disability*). Not all of it is down to this however. Sometimes an autistic can have inherent anxiety as the two conditions are believed to share a [genetic link](#) and as per that hyperlink, anxiety may affect up to 84% of autistics. Depression may follow lengthy periods of unaddressed anxiety.

Schools should have a counselling service, but the reality is if they do, that they are part-time, often visiting every-so-often and have long waiting lists (*I have heard of an 18 month waiting list before*). The other issue is, autistics need a therapist who understands autism, if the counsellor is not trained in autism they may not be much use. Talking therapies are not successful for a significant number of autistics. Solutions are what's needed – so we are back to the issue of the school needing to provide reasonable adjustments and the right support for the child to ensure mental ill-health is not triggered. It's hard enough coping in the school environment for most autistics, so any added problems whilst there, could be a perfect storm for mental health problems, when ingrained, it becomes harder to address.

We all know CAMHS are largely [unfit for purpose](#), so reasonable adjustments as part of the early intervention recommended by the Government, are the way to go, to prevent escalation of mental health problems.

When the balance is tipped, autistic children become school-refusers or are excluded through unmanageable behaviour. But the law says schools must [meet an autistic child's needs](#) in the first place and cannot exclude autistic children on the basis of their disability.

Disruptive Behaviour

This can be for a variety of reasons, once the reason is identified it can be addressed - and treating an autistic child the same way as neurotypical children won't be likely to identify it. Think [square peg round hole](#) mentality.

- if the autistic child has co-morbid ADHD, they might be bored and hyperactive;
- if they are gifted and talented they might disrupt through the work not being challenging enough;
- if they are suffering sensory issues it could trigger a stress reaction of disrupting the lesson;
- if they have additional difficulties such as dyslexia and don't have support, again attention could wander as they can't get on with the work;
- if they are sat with peers who are trouble-makers who goad them into misbehaviour;
- if they don't understand the work (*see section: 'Misunderstanding Teachers' Instructions'*) they will again be bored and could disrupt the class.

So teachers need to accurately identify the difficulties a child has, work with parents to understand the types of thing that will be affecting the child in school and get to know enough about the child, to ensure the right solutions and support are in place. Sending the child to stand outside the classroom doesn't do it!

I do happen to think [inclusion](#) in mainstream schools is wrong for most autistics, but while so many are having to endure it, schools have a responsibility to ensure they are supported the right way so they can fully access their education, not just cope but thrive, and meet potential.