



Activity leaders and sports instructors: a guide to autism

If you are a sports instructor or leader of an organised activity group, such as the Cubs or Brownies, you may be asked to include a child with autism in your class or group. Here is short guide to help you meet their needs.

Taking part in a sport or joining a group like the Scouts, Girls Brigade or Woodcraft Folk are popular activities for children and young people. Children with disabilities are encouraged to join in such activities to help improve their health and give them opportunities to make friends.

Autism is a lifelong disability that affects the way a person communicates with and relates to people around them. Children with autism have difficulty relating to others in a meaningful way. Their ability to develop friendships is generally limited, as is their capacity to understand other people's emotional expressions. All children with autism have difficulties in three main areas: social interaction, social communication and social imagination. This is known as the triad of impairments. Children with autism often have high anxiety levels, have a resistance to change and/or have obsessions with particular objects or topics of special interest to them, such as dinosaurs or trains. Some children with autism may also have accompanying learning disabilities.

Autism affects different people in different ways and to different extents, so the difficulties and behaviour you see in one child may be very different to that which you see in another. This is why autism is known as a spectrum condition. You will often see it referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Some children may be diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome (AS) or high-functioning autism. Children with AS have fewer problems with language than those with autism. They often speak fluently, though their words can sometimes sound formal or stilted. Children with AS do not usually have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism; in fact, they are often of average or above average intelligence. Many children with AS or high-functioning autism will enter mainstream school and, with the right support and encouragement, make good progress and go on to further education and employment.

Like all children, each child with autism is different from the next, so the descriptions given here should only be taken as a general guide. Nevertheless, the problems affecting social interaction, communication and imagination, along with repetitive behaviour, are common to all. For brevity, we use the word autism in this information sheet to refer to all children on the autism spectrum, including those with Asperger syndrome. You may not need to use all the strategies detailed below but you may find some of them useful.

Visual communication

It is believed that the brains of children with autism are wired differently from those of typical developing children. As a result, they are often visual learners who need things to be broken down into small chunks in order to understand them. It often helps to provide a child with autism with a visual timetable of what is going to

happen next. For example, if you are teaching a child to swim, the timetable could include pictures of the child arriving at the swimming pool, getting changed, having a swimming lesson, free play, getting showered, getting dressed and going home. A laminated copy of the timetable can be placed alongside the pool, within easy reach of the child. For further information on using visual timetables see our information sheet, Visual supports, available from the Information Centre.

Giving spoken instructions

Children with autism may find it difficult to follow instructions given to the group as a whole. For example, they might not understand that "Time to go in" applies to them, so you may need to give the instruction individually. Always say the child's name first - "Johnny, it's time to go in" - to catch their attention and let them know that you are speaking to them. Use a calm voice and do not shout. Speak slowly and clearly and, if you do not get an immediate response, be patient - processing instructions can take longer for a child with autism than a typically developing child. Children with autism may also find it difficult to process too much verbal information at once, so try and break up your instructions and, wherever possible, back them up with pictures or written cues.

Children with autism tend to take things literally. Telling them to pull up their socks may well result in them literally pulling up their socks; they are not making fun of you, they are simply following the instruction you gave them. Try to avoid using idioms and metaphors and always state exactly what you mean. A child with autism may also be confused by names such as Brown Owl and may literally expect to see a brown bird when they are taken to Brownies for the first time. Showing them a photo of the Brown Owl may help to clarify things prior to joining the group.

When a child with autism is faced with a new situation, he or she may become highly anxious. Careful planning before they start a new club or activity will therefore be invaluable in helping to reduce their anxiety levels.

This can be done in a number of ways. If at all possible, invite the child to visit the building in which the event takes place when there are no children about. This will enable the child to become familiar with the new surroundings without the distraction of noisy children. This visit can be followed up by further visits while the other children are there, gradually increasing the length of time the child stays. At first the parents may wish to stay with their child, and this should be allowed, even if it is not standard practice.

Use a book of photos to familiarise the child with the location and activity, showing pictures of the building with and without children, the group leaders or instructors, the various activities that take place, the journey to and from the group, and so on. This may need to be shown to the child multiple times until they become accustomed to their new activities.

One question that may arise is whether or not the other children should be told that one of the people in the group has autism. There are pros and cons to doing this and the decision ultimately rests with the child's parents. Some children, sadly, may bully the child if they know he or she has autism, but they may do this in any case if they perceive the child as being different. Other children will do the opposite and want to befriend the child with autism.

If you decide to tell the other children, it is important to explain the differences caused by autism in a way they will understand. They must understand, for example, why the child with autism is not told off for doing something that they themselves would be told off for. A frequently-used strategy for managing the child's relationship with the rest of the group is to create a 'Circle of Friends'. Please contact The National Autistic Society (NAS) Information Centre for more details about this or download our information sheet on [Circle of](#)

[Friends](#). We can also provide a list of books that explain autism to children and young people.

Another advantage of making the child's autism known to the rest of the group is that you can then use peer modelling, in which another child shows the child with autism how to do a particular task. This will support the child in their understanding - when teaching or showing a child with autism a new task, it should be broken down into small steps or stages, allowing the child plenty of time to learn each step.

The NAS has a lesson plan available on request which can be adapted to help other children in the group understand what autism is. There are also some books available on this topic (see [Further reading](#)).

Siblings

If the child has a sibling in the same group, try not to depend on them to look after their brother or sister, as they need to be able to enjoy the activities without taking on caring responsibilities. This doesn't mean that you can't ask their advice if you are experiencing difficulties with the child with autism.

Children with autism are usually happy in a structured environment and are often adept at learning the rules and observing them.

Children with autism are typically visual learners so it is a good idea to have written or visual instructions attached to the wall or given to the child so that they understand the rules of a group or activity. These should be tailored to the child's needs and might need to include instructions like "listen when Brown Owl is talking". It is important to establish rules from the child's very first day in the group, but that does not mean new rules cannot be established as the need arises. All rules should be carefully explained to the child, together with the reason for the rule, according to the child's level of understanding.

Most games and sports have rules or formal conventions about how participants should behave with one another. These can sometimes be very difficult for a child with autism to understand. They will often want to join in the game (eg football) but have no concept of how to take part. It may be a good idea to give the child a buddy who will guide him or her through the game. It is also helpful to include games and activities such as swimming, rock climbing, kite flying, running etc, that do not require the child to be part of a group. Some children with autism may prefer and do better in individual rather than team sports.

Children with autism often have no sense of danger, and cannot always foresee the consequences of their actions. It is therefore important that you communicate safety rules clearly and in a way that the child understands. It is a good idea to give parents a written list of rules before the child goes to the club so that they can go through the rules themselves with the child. Also, make sure you go through the rules with the child before the start of any particular activity. It may be necessary to do this on multiple occasions before the child fully understands.

Children with autism may be hypersensitive (over-sensitive) or hyposensitive (under-sensitive) to sensory situations, such as light or sound. For example, a child may feel physical pain at the slightest touch or may break a bone without giving any indication that they are in pain. Likewise, they can find sound intolerable and may have to wear ear defenders to block out the noise which they find physically painful. They may display self-stimulatory behaviours such as hand-flapping or spinning, which make them feel they are in control of a painful environment.

One person with autism has described their sensory overload:

If I get sensory overload then I just shut down - you get what's known as fragmentation... it's weird, like being tuned into 40 TV channels.

Wilkes, 2005

It may also be very difficult for a child with autism to listen to you in a noisy environment, simply because they cannot filter out background sound. If at all possible, provide a quiet room or space where they can go to calm down.

Difficulty with balance may make activities involving balance such as sporting activities very challenging for a child with autism. On the other hand, they may seek out stimulation by rocking or spinning. Dyspraxia (clumsiness) is also a common condition amongst people with an autism spectrum disorder.

In many cases, there is no reason why children with autism cannot go on trips with the group, or away to camp, although it is essential that the trip is carefully planned.

Some children may need one-to-one support, either from an adult or a child buddy. If possible, show the child some photos or a brochure of where he or she will be going. If they are going camping, it will be a good idea for them to spend a night in the tent in their back garden beforehand so that they get used to the idea.

Arrange a meeting with the child's parents and discuss how best to support them on the trip. Include the child in the meeting so that they know what the plans are for the trip and that the group leader will be acting as their parent during the time they are away.

Allow the child to phone home once you have reached your destination. This will benefit both the child and their parents. It is also a good idea to provide the child with a visual timetable so he or she always knows what is going to happen next. For example, the timetable could indicate a picture of a coach, followed by a picture of a café/restaurant, the coach again, the camp site etc. See our [Visual supports](#) information sheet for more information.

All team leaders need to be aware of the rules and expectations of the child and make sure that these are consistently applied.

Your language should be clear and simple.

Avoid ambiguity.

Use rewards not punishment (children with autism may be more motivated if the reward is associated with any special interests they have).

Share information and experiences with parents or carers.

Be aware of what might upset the child.

Further reading

Attwood, T. (1998). *Asperger's syndrome: a guide for parents and professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley

Attwood, T. (2008). *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley

Colley, J. (2006). *Going on trips with an Asperger pupil*. London: The National Autistic Society

Haddon, M. (2004). *The curious incident of the dog in the night time*. London: Red Fox Definitions

The National Autistic Society. (2003). *Visual supports*. London: The National Autistic Society

Scout Information Centre. (2008). *Autism and Asperger syndrome*. Online:

www.scoutbase.org.uk/library/hqdocs/facts/pdfs/fs250025.pdf (19 November 2008)

Slade, L. (2007). *Circle of friends*. London: The National Autistic Society. Online: www.autism.org.uk/16877 (19 November 2008)

Spilsbury, L. (2001). *What does it mean to have autism?* Oxford: Heinemann

Wilkes, K. (2005) *The sensory world of the autism spectrum a greater understanding*. London: The National Autistic Society

Wing, L. (2002) *The autistic spectrum: a guide for parents and professionals*. London: Constable and Robinson

Quick link to this page: www.autism.org.uk/23143

If you require further information, please contact:

Autism Helpline

Tel:	0808 800 4104 (open 10.00am-4.00pm, Monday-Friday)
Text:	07903 200 200
Minicom service:	0845 070 4003
Email enquiry service:	visit www.autism.org.uk/enquiry and complete the online form

The [Autism Helpline](#) provides impartial, confidential information, advice and support for people with autism spectrum disorders, their families, professionals, researchers and students.

The National Autistic Society
393 City Road
London, EC1V 1NG
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7833 2299
Fax: +44 (0)20 7833 9666
Email: nas@nas.org.uk

[Administrative offices only]

VAT registration number: 653370050; registered as a charity in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427) © The National Autistic Society 2012