



## Tyssen ARP

### Social Understanding and Flexibility of Thought

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and interacts with people around them. It is often referred to as a 'spectrum' because the strengths and needs of each person with autism vary greatly.

Although the presentation of autism is different for every person, every person with autism has needs in two areas, known as the dyad of impairments and these include:

#### **Social communication**

People with ASD can experience difficulties in communicating with others and in understanding what others are communicating to them. People with ASD cannot always interpret the actions and intentions of others, making social interaction very difficult. It is often wrongly assumed that people with ASD do not want to interact with others. Although this may sometimes be the case, most people with ASD simply lack the skills and understanding to be able to do this easily. If social interaction makes the person anxious, they might also avoid it in order to reduce the emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety.

(NAS, 2011).

Difficulties with social communication can have implications on a child's social understanding, for example they may:-

- make abrupt or insensitive comments
- find it difficult to understand sarcasm, irony or metaphors
- interpret instructions literally (e.g. "go and wash your hands in the toilet")
- reading other people's facial expressions and avoid or overuse eye contact
- appear aloof and uninterested
- be unable to understand social rules (e.g. standing too close, inappropriate greeting or choice of conversation)
- develop rule-bound behaviour and inflexible routines, which can inhibit social development .



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- find it difficult to understand turn-taking and group work

(Points from NAS, 2011)

#### **Repetitive and restrictive behaviours and reduced flexibility of thought.**

“Many people with ASD have extremely creative imaginations. It is perhaps better to describe this as a difficulty with *flexibility of thought*. People with AS tend to be rigid thinkers and cannot always conceive of hypothetical situations or empathise with another person’s point of view.”

(NAS, 2011)

Difficulties with Flexibility of thought can lead to a number of functional difficulties, including:

- Being able to generalise learnt skills/ vocabulary within different lessons and contexts.
- Dealing with frequent changes of topic, and following multiple concurrent subjects.
- People with ASD tend not to be able to multi-task, and find it difficult to shift attention readily between subjects and tasks.
- Working in groups that don’t follow rule-bound behaviour.
- Predicting what will happen next, e.g. coming back home after going shopping
- Difficulty in understanding the concept of danger and consequences, e.g. crossing the road
- Coping with unfamiliar situations

#### **Supporting difficulties with Social understanding at the ARP:**

At Tyssen ARP staff have an understanding of the particular strengths and needs of each pupil they work with in order to support and develop their social understanding effectively. This may include:

- Specialist targeted groups (see group folder for full details) such as:
  - Circles of Friends
  - Interaction groups
  - Team challenges (working together to achieve goal)



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- Treasure hunt
- Attention autism
- Comic Strip Conversations (refer to communication and interaction policy)
- Social Stories™ (refer to communication and interaction policy)
- Community visits
- Snack groups
- Explicit teaching of social skills throughout the day.
- Regular meetings between professionals and ARP staff allow to think of strategies around support specific scenarios.
- Visual supports around asking peers for equipment.

### Supporting individuals difficulties with flexibility of thought at the ARP

- ARP Staff are given the opportunity to go on centralised ASD training run by the Speech and Language Therapist and Specialist Teachers in Hackney. This is a two day course that includes theory and supporting individuals with ASD. On this training staff will develop skills in understanding why pupils may have difficulties with flexibility of thinking and how to support them.
- Supporting difficulties with change of routine, e.g. through the use of:
  - Visual timetables and within task schedules (modified at the child's level) – see *the visual timetable policy*.
  - Social stories and countdown calendars for planned events such as school holidays.
  - Use of 'change' cards, to allow the children to increase their ability to cope with changes throughout the day.
- Directly teaching social skills, for example through team games, explicitly stating what behaviour need to be shown and how (i.e. Circle of Friends, Team Challenges, Lego Therapy). All involving skills relating to problem solving and decision making.
- Maintaining known routines but changing small aspects (for example, once children are familiar with the musical interactions routine, we may modify small aspects rather than making a number of chances at once which would result in anxieties and refusal to continue).



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- The ARP policy is to assign a staff member to a child for half a term, to ensure consistency and support individuals with their known difficulties regarding change. This approach reduces stress and anxieties for children. They are more readily able to access the curriculum and cope with unfamiliar situations with this known and reliable adult. The supporting adults are changed to reduce rigid behaviours with regards to that adult. As there are a small group of known staff working at the ARP, staff and pupils quickly become familiar with all of them.
- When there are staff changes, children are prepared by the use of a 'working with who' board. Visual cards of staff are used to support student's understanding.
- During choosing time, children have the ability to have some time in a calm environment whilst completing an activity of their own choosing, supporting emotional regulation. We are aware that pupils with ASD have special interests and can sometimes become fixated on that particular item. Staff, therefore, ensure that the child's choice of activity differs, for example a child will not be able to play on the iPad every time. Staff will ensure that other motivating items are available.
- The ARP are aware that skills are required to be explicitly taught due to difficulties with thinking flexibly and so community activities such as shopping, crossing the road and going to the dentist are incorporated into the timetable