

ASD Symptoms that may Impact on Behaviour in the Classroom

Even if their IQ is average or above, children with ASD are still likely to have problems academically. Characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that are likely to impact on behaviour in the classroom include cognition, communication, visual processing, socialization, sensory issues and other ASD symptoms.

Cognition

Cognition refers to the processes that are involved in thinking. Cognitive processes that are likely to impact on classroom behaviour in children with ASD include generalisation, maturity, rote memory, theory of mind, and problem solving.

Generalisation is the application of new skills and knowledge across different settings and individuals, something that children with ASD often have trouble applying. For example, a child may be able to tie their shoes at home, but not at school. They may also have trouble integrating learned material and experience, for example, they may be able to recite a rule, but will not follow it when it applies. Information that is learned using role play may not be used in actual situation due to a poor ability to read, interpret and act upon social cues. The thinking area of the brain of children with ASD does not function well when they are under stress. They may act in certain way (well practiced behaviour) even if they learned a better way for dealing with a problem.

An individual's *maturity* is often assessed by how they act in social situations.

Maturity may be defined by the ability to recognise and understand social cues, to think about our own behaviour and that of others, and to make judgements about others. All of things are difficult for individuals with ASD, and all require thinking, which is particularly difficult with the individual is under stress. A child with ASD may appear to have a level of emotional maturity equivalent to 2/3 of their chronological age. That means that a child who is 12 may have the emotional maturity of an eight year-old.

Rote Memory is memorising something by repeating it without an understanding of the underlying concept, similar to parroting or mimicking. Children with ASD may appear to have an extraordinary memory, but it can be disadvantageous as it may appear that they do understand something when they do not. Also, they may not be able to retrieve the information that have stored when it is needed.

It is well known that individuals with ASD have deficits in *Theory of Mind* (TOM). This means that they have difficulty explaining their own behaviour, and that it can impact on the thoughts and feelings of others. They have difficulty understanding their own emotions and those of others, and predicting the emotions or behaviours of others. Understanding the perspectives and intentions of others is also difficult. Children with ASD may also have problems with joint attention, gesturing using non verbal means (see diagram below), and with social conventions such as politeness and turn taking.



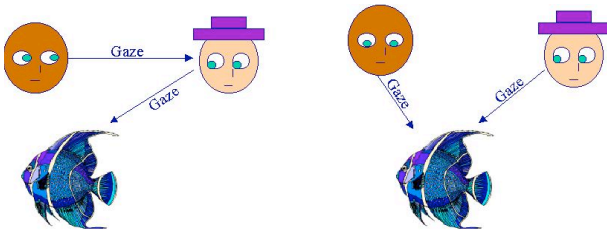


Diagram of *Joint Attention*. Retrieved from http://eigsti.psy.uconn.edu/jt_attn.html 18 May 2011

Although children with ASD may show high level *problem solving* and thinking when their special interest is concerned, this is not always used during school hours. They may use one, well practiced strategy in all situations. Problem solving is still more difficult if abstract rather than concrete thinking is needed. Concrete thinking is logical and literal, based on fact and what can be seen, whereas abstract thinking is based on concepts and the ability to make generalisations, and may be described as 'thinking outside of the box'.

Communication

If children with ASD do have *language*, they commonly have problems with it. Their language for social interaction is often poor, repetitive, centred around one topic, and monotone.

Individuals with ASD may also have poor *nonverbal communication*. They may stand too close or too far from others, may have no eye contact or stare intensely. They may have an abnormal body posture and have an inexpressive face. They find it hard to understand the gestures and facial expressions of others.

Visual Processing

Individuals with ASD process information more easily when it is presented visually than when it is presented auditorily.

Socialisation

Children with ASD often have socialisation problems. Socialisation is behaving in a way that is expected of you by others. Likely reasons for this include a view that is self focussed, lack of understanding communication and social cues and rules, a social style that is clumsy, and use of language that is sometimes too direct and inappropriate.

Sensory Issues

The sensory issues of children with ASD may impact on their behaviour in the classroom. Children with ASD may be hypersensitive to visual stimuli or sounds, and may respond negatively when overloaded with sensory stimuli. They often have strong preferences for certain foods and a low or high tolerance to pain. Additionally, certain fabrics, clothing labels or seams may be intolerable.

Other ASD Symptoms

Other symptoms of ASD that may impact on behaviour in the classroom include the ways in which these children cope with *stress and excitement*. Children with ASD become stressed easily, and others may not be aware of this stress because it is not shown using nonverbal communication such as body language and tone of voice. As a result, behaviour is likely to escalate. In addition, when children with ASD are over excited, they may lose control as a result of not being able to monitor their behaviour.

Children may become *distracted* easily and quickly. When given a non-preferred task to perform, they may initially follow the directions, but then stop. They might be distracted by things that seem irrelevant, by their special interest, by stress or by overstimulation. They often find it difficult to determine which stimuli are relevant and



which are not, and may focus on very specific things.

Finally, children with ASD function better in an environment that is organised, something that they may depend on others for. They also like structure and can appear inflexible as they find change difficult.

For ideas on how to address these issues in the classroom, see the article 'ASD and Strategies for the Classroom'.

Reference

Smith Myles, B. & Southwick, J. (1999). Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rage and Meltdowns. USA: Autism Asperger Publishing.

