



At St. Anne's we love, learn and grow together as part of God's family. We foster a growth mindset so our pupils have bold aspirations to live life in all its fullness. We let our light shine brightly - continually asking God to show us how best to shine so we can be beacons of His life.

St Anne's CE Primary SEND Newsletter

February issue – autism

This month's newsletter will be focusing on autism. A lot of resources and information which have informed this month's newsletter has been taken from the national autistic society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/>



It is so important we raise awareness of autism so that we can build a culture of empathy and acceptance amongst our friends at St Anne's. We have several pupils with autism at St Anne's therefore we should learn about their world, their challenges and their strengths so that we can learn, live and grow together, as part of God's family.

Contents

1. What is autism?
2. Social communication and interaction challenges
3. Meltdowns and shutdowns
4. Autism and girls
5. Masking
6. Social stories
7. Book recommendations
8. What should I do if I think my child is autistic?

1. What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. More than one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK.

The definition of autism has changed over the decades and could change in future years as we understand more. Some people feel the spectrum is too broad, arguing an autistic person with 24/7 support needs cannot be compared with a person who finds supermarket lights too bright. We often find that autistic people and their families with different support needs share many of the same challenges, whether that's getting enough support from mental health, education and social care services or being misunderstood by people close to them.

Are they autistic or do they have autism? Is it a disorder?

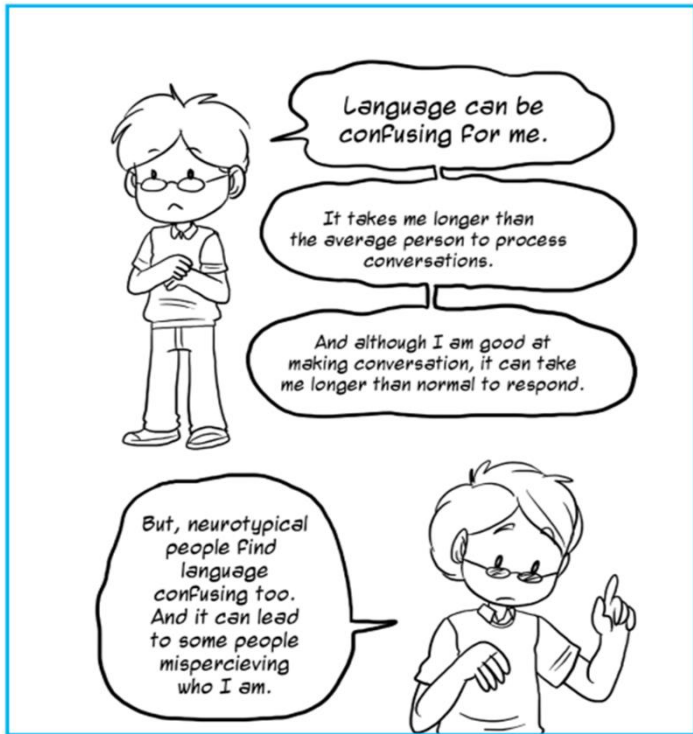
The importance of language is really important to autistic people. Watch the video below, made by autistic people, which explains the language they prefer people to use surrounding autism.



<https://vimeo.com/755133175/00ad486573>

Now we have the language right, let's explore a little more about autism from an autistic person's point of view:

Understanding the Spectrum

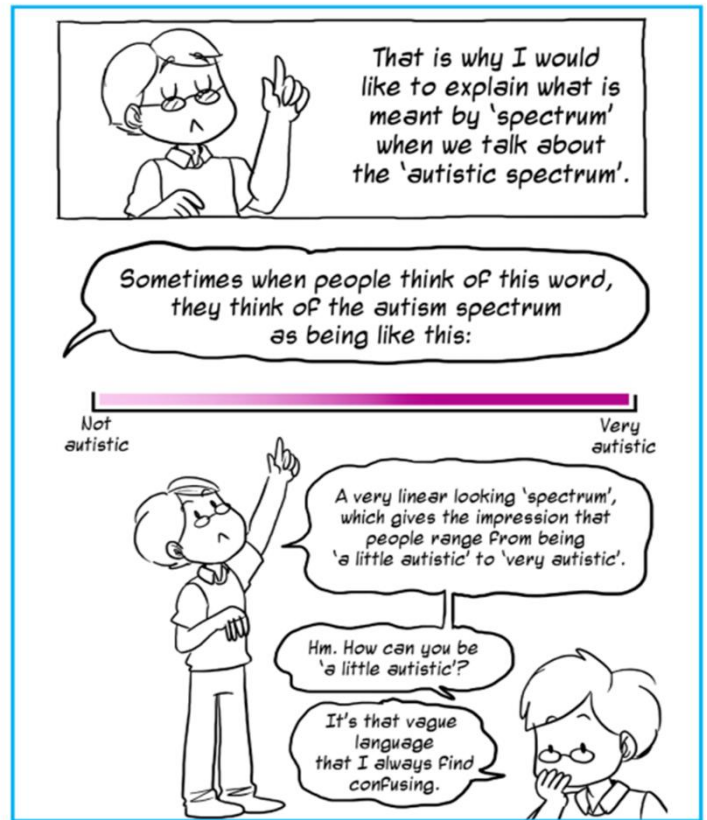


Language can be confusing for me.

It takes me longer than the average person to process conversations.

And although I am good at making conversation, it can take me longer than normal to respond.

But, neurotypical people find language confusing too. And it can lead to some people misperceiving who I am.



That is why I would like to explain what is meant by 'spectrum' when we talk about the 'autistic spectrum'.

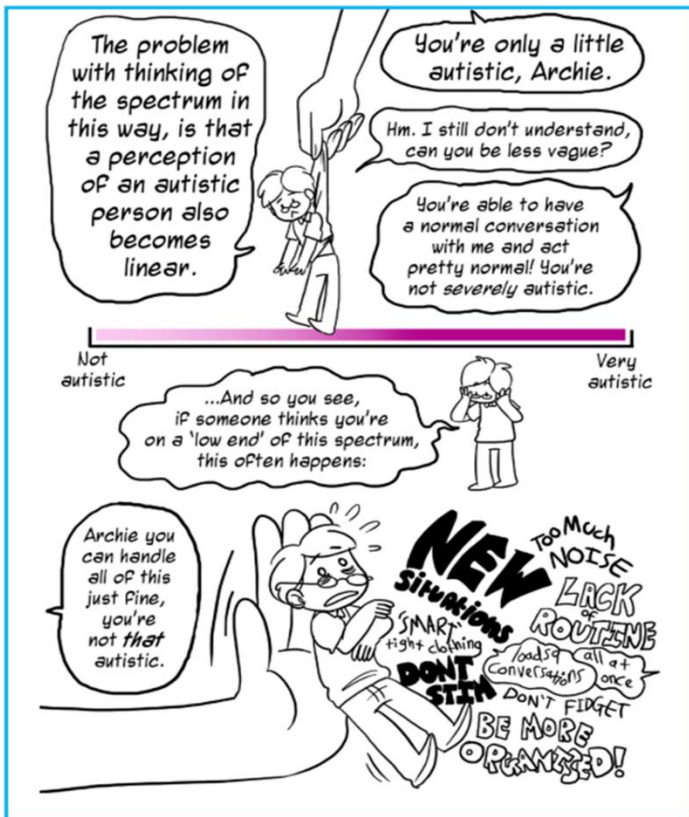
Sometimes when people think of this word, they think of the autism spectrum as being like this:

Not autistic ————— Very autistic

A very linear looking 'spectrum', which gives the impression that people range from being 'a little autistic' to 'very autistic'.

Hm. How can you be 'a little autistic'?

It's that vague language that I always find confusing.



The problem with thinking of the spectrum in this way, is that a perception of an autistic person also becomes linear.

You're only a little autistic, Archie.

Hm. I still don't understand, can you be less vague?

You're able to have a normal conversation with me and act pretty normal! You're not severely autistic.

Not autistic ————— Very autistic

...And so you see, if someone thinks you're on a 'low end' of this spectrum, this often happens:

Archie you can handle all of this just fine, you're not *that* autistic.

NEW SITUATIONS TOO MUCH NOISE
LACK OF ROUTINE
DON'T FORGET BE MORE ORGANIZED!
SMART TIGHT CLOTHING
LOADS OF CALLS + CONVERSATIONS
DON'T GET



Ah. Ahh- ACT LIKE EVERYONE BUT CONCEAL IT IN 10X MORE INFORMATION AND LOOK NORMAL WITH OTHERWISE PEOPLE GET ANGRY

How can you be tired? everyone does this every day, you're just being lazy.

Wow you're being so over dramatic, get over it!

Wowk, you're more autistic than I thought.

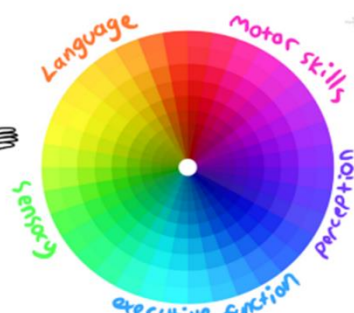
I'm gonna re-label you on this spectrum... Since you're very autistic I don't think you should have a job, just to be safe y'know?

And if you're seen as being on the 'high end' of this spectrum-

It can lead to some people labeling you as being incapable of doing anything at all.

Not autistic ————— Very autistic

The truth is though, someone who is neurodiverse in some areas of their brain, will also be no different to your average person in other areas of their brain.



You see, the autistic spectrum looks something more like this.

The spectrum consists of many different 'traits', or ways in which the brain processes information.

Some traits create difficulties in every day life. (hence being diagnosed)



But also many traits are useful in every day life.

Each person with autism will have a set of traits all in different areas of the spectrum. The areas where they don't have a trait will function no differently to a neurotypical brain, but may be affected by circumstances. In example, I am good at making conversation (language). But I get sensory overload in loud and crowded spaces, which then makes conversation very hard for me.



And so, another autistic person might be very happy in loud crowds, but find conversation hard in general.



You could say I'm just a real 'party animal'!

You can see with this spectrum then, that not every autistic person has 'savant skills'. Or that someone who can't communicate verbally might still understand what you're saying, but just need a different way to communicate, such as sign language.

It shows how not every autistic person acts the same way, and we are all capable of varying strengths and weaknesses.



Sometimes, if someone is diagnosed as being 'on the spectrum', and informs another person of this, it's so that they can get some understanding and respect for the things they are unable to do. **But**, it is also so that they can cooperate with the world around them- so that they can be the best in the things they **can** do.

I hope that in the future, people will better understand the term 'spectrum', and continue to respect the differences **and** similarities we all share in how we experience the world.



Spectrum Gaming is an online community for autistic young people which has three main intended outcomes, building friendships, increasing self-acceptance and advocacy. They have recently made a website about autism for young autistic people:

<https://autismunderstood.co.uk/>

2. Social communication and interaction challenges

Social communication

Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand sarcasm or tone of voice. Other challenges include:

- taking things literally and not understanding abstract concepts
- needing extra time to process information or answer questions
- repeating what others say to them (this is called echolalia)

For communication top tips, see here: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/tips>

Social interaction

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard to navigate the social world. Autistic people may:

- appear to be insensitive
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate
- find it hard to form friendships.

3. Meltdowns and shutdowns - what's the difference?

When everything becomes too much for an autistic person, they can go into meltdown or shutdown. These are very intense and exhausting experiences.

A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be verbal (eg shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (eg kicking, lashing out, biting) or both. Meltdowns

in children are often mistaken for temper tantrums and parents and their autistic children often experience hurtful comments and judgmental stares from less understanding members of the public.

A shutdown appears less intense to the outside world but can be equally debilitating. Shutdowns are also a response to being overwhelmed, but may appear more passive - eg an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'. One autistic woman described having a shutdown as: 'just as frustrating as a meltdown, because of not being able to figure out how to react how I want to, or not being able to react at all; there isn't any 'figuring out' because the mind feels like it is past a state of being able to interpret.'

More information on meltdowns, how to anticipate them, identify triggers and what to do, can be found here: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/meltdowns/all-audiences>

It is so important to raise awareness of autistic meltdowns, not only so that families can support their children but also so that we create a culture of empathy and understanding. Talk to your child about autism, whether they are autistic themselves or whether they have a friend in their class who is autistic. This will help develop a culture of acceptance and understanding. You may see some children wearing a sunflower lanyard: The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a simple tool for people to voluntarily share that they have a disability or condition that may not be immediately apparent - and that they may need a helping hand, understanding, or more time in shops, at work, on transport, or in public spaces.

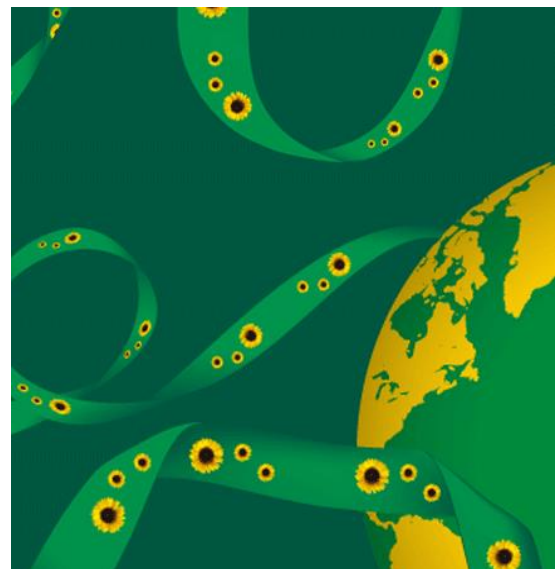
Here are a few things you can do if you see an autistic child having a meltdown:

If you see a child having a meltdown, they may be autistic

Here's what you can do to help:



1. Don't stare or draw unwanted attention. Ask others to do the same.
2. Try not to judge. An overwhelmed child is not being naughty.
3. If appropriate, offer help. It can make a big difference.
4. Create a safe, quiet space. For example, dim the lights.
5. Give them time. It can take a while to recover from a meltdown.



4. Autism and girls

It is important that autistic women and girls receive a diagnosis (or recognise that they are autistic) so they can understand themselves and access support. However, because of stereotyped ideas about what autism looks like and who can be autistic, many autistic women and girls struggle to get a diagnosis, receive a diagnosis late in life or are misdiagnosed with conditions other than autism.

Autistic characteristics in women and girls may differ from those of other autistic people. They might seem to have fewer social difficulties than autistic men and boys, but this could be because they are more likely to 'mask' their autistic traits (though the stress of doing so can result in anxiety and overwhelm). At school, autistic girls may be more likely to be part of a friendship group and this could be a reason that teachers don't notice their differences. They may also be missed if their academic achievement masks difficulties they are facing in other areas.

Some of the core characteristics of autism are having 'repetitive behaviours' and highly-focused interests. Stereotyped examples of these include rocking backwards and forwards, and a fascination with trains. However, in autistic women and girls these behaviours and interests may be similar to those of non-autistic women and girls, such as twirling hair and reading books, and as such may go unnoticed despite the greater intensity or focus typical for autistic people.

Doctors and other healthcare professionals can lack knowledge about how autism may present differently in women and girls. This means women and girls may be misdiagnosed with mental health issues or their autistic traits may be missed amid the symptoms of co-occurring conditions. Some tools used to diagnose autism are designed to identify autistic characteristics that may be more common in autistic men and boys. This means the process may not be as sensitive to characteristics more commonly found in autistic women and girls.

There is a very pronounced gender difference – the ratio of females to males is typically reported as 1:4. However, this is an average figure. Among intellectually able individuals with ASD, the ratio of girls to boys is significantly lower – approximately 1:10 – whereas for groups with ASD and moderate to severe learning disabilities, the ratio rises to approximately 1:2 (Dworzynski et al. 2012).

Diagnostic overshadowing/ misdiagnosis

Knowledge about the ASC profile of girls and women is very limited. Their underlying ASC may be overshadowed by coexisting conditions (for example, ADHD) and/or secondary symptoms such as mental health disorders (eating, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, conduct, paranoia, depressive, personality or sleep disorders). This can result in referral to non-ASC services that may miss the root cause of ASC-associated difficulties. Misdiagnosis can lead to inappropriate treatment and management of the problem, and to continuing negative life impacts and bleak outcomes.

Delayed diagnosis

Many intellectually able women with ASC have received late diagnosis. As a result, they have recalled, prior to diagnosis, a lack of support and compassion from others, psychological confusion and distress due to their unexplained differences, and exclusion and victimisation by peers and teaching staff.

Lack of diagnosis

Many girls are never referred for diagnosis, as their ASC traits – ameliorated by masking and unrecognised due to male stereotyped expectations – go unacknowledged (Dworzynski et al. 2012).



Females on the Autism Spectrum

Behaviour

- Less prone to act out physically or aggressively
- Intense focus on a particular subject, often involving animals or classic literature
- Appears anxious when there are changes in routine
- Observes human behaviour, learning to mask difficulties
- Practices rituals that appear to have no function
- May play with dolls or toys well beyond the typical age for these items
- Tendency toward perfectionism in certain aspects of her life
- High risk of having episodes of eating disorders and self medication
- Stimming behaviors, such as hand flapping, rocking, or spinning can appear much milder. They can also be internalised/thoughts instead of external behaviours

Often more socially aware and driven

Males may often present with many of these traits, just like females can present with the more male type traits. It is called a female presentation because it is more commonly seen amongst females on the autism spectrum

Communication

- More aware of the need for social interaction
- May have an exceptional vocabulary
- Tends to mimic rather than providing natural responses
- May converse in predictable, "scripted" ways
- Seems to struggle with non-verbal aspects of communication, such as body language and tone of voice
- May use odd inflection
- Appears to have difficulty dealing with unexpected verbal responses
- More able to follow social actions through observation

Social

- Usually has only one or two close friends at school
- May have difficulty fitting in due to clothing and hairstyle choices
- May make greater efforts to avoid drawing attention to themselves
- Appears excessively shy or avoids interacting with others or making the first move socially
- Can be quite controlling in play
- Seems uncomfortable during conversation. Can struggle with eye contact
- Often "mothered" by others in primary school but bullied in high school
- May play appropriately with toys and engage in pretend play or may focus on organizing objects or toys

Often shows empathy and compassion but may be confused by non-verbal social signals

Usually holds it together well while out and explodes at home



www.thelittleblackduck.com.au
©Copyright the little black duck 2018.
All rights reserved. Advice is general in nature.
Not to be reproduced without prior permission

5. Autism and masking

Everyone—with or without autism—camouflages sometimes. For example, if you are feeling shy about meeting someone new, you might pretend to be really brave even though you do not feel it. But for some autistic people, camouflaging happens every time they talk to someone and this takes a lot of effort. This makes autism less visible to other people.

The autistic person may not be aware of doing this. Like a chameleon changing the patterns on its skin to fit into the surroundings. The chameleon is still there, but it is trying to look like everything else around it. Examples of camouflaging in autism include forcing yourself to make eye contact with other people even if you do not want to, or thinking of a list of questions to ask every time you meet someone new, so you do not run out of things to say, or standing near others in the playground so as not to stand out



People with autism have explained that they mask to fit into society, feel safe, be liked, have friends and avoid being bullied.

The dangers of masking can result in:

- Exhaustion/burn out
- High levels of anxiety
- Results suggest that camouflaging autistic traits is associated with increased risk of experiencing thwarted belongingness
- Experiences of camouflaging could relate to higher rates of depression

Many autistic people say that if they spend a whole day camouflaging at school or work, they need to come home and sit by themselves for a while to recover. One woman in a study said, "It is really exhausting!" Some autistic people also feel like they are being fake versions of themselves, and they want to be able to stop camouflaging so that their friends can get to know the "real" them.

What can we do to help?

- Recognise/look for signs of masking
- Create an ethos and culture of celebrating neurodiversity and difference in schools
- Acknowledge qualities of autistic girls/promote and value authenticity
- Unpick unwanted behaviours - what is the root cause?
 - Careful what we praise in school and at home that reinforce the 'masking loop' e.g. Well done for sitting so nicely/ well done for looking at me when I'm talking to you.
- Teach self-advocacy
- Self esteem - talk, listen, listen, listen, repeat
- Celebrate and explore special interests

6. Social stories

Social stories and comic strip conversations can help autistic people develop greater social understanding and help them stay safe.

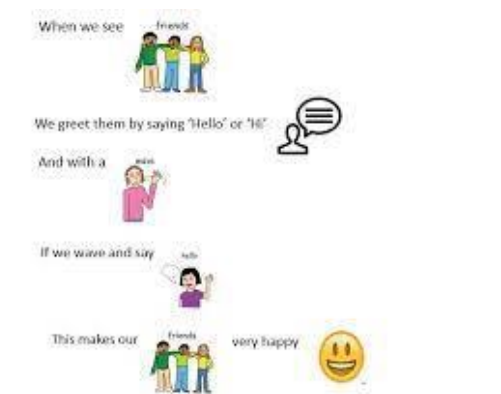
What are social stories?

Social stories were created by Carol Gray in 1991. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

What are social stories for?

Social stories can be used to:

- develop self-care skills (for example, how to clean teeth, wash hands or get dressed), social skills (for example, sharing, asking for help, saying thank you, interrupting) and academic abilities
- help someone to understand how others might behave or respond in a particular situation
- help others understand the perspective of an autistic person and why they may respond or behave in a particular way



- help a person to cope with changes to routine and unexpected or distressing events (for example, absence of teacher, moving house, thunderstorms)
- provide positive feedback to a person about an area of strength or achievement in order to develop self-esteem
- as a behavioural strategy (for example, what to do when angry, how to cope with obsessions).

How do social stories help?

Social stories present information in a literal, 'concrete' way, which may improve a person's understanding of a previously difficult or ambiguous situation or activity. The presentation and content can be adapted to meet different people's needs.

They can help with sequencing (what comes next in a series of activities) and 'executive functioning' (planning and organising).

By providing information about what might happen in a particular situation, and some guidelines for behaviour, you can increase structure in a person's life and thereby reduce anxiety.

Creating or using a social story can help you to understand how the autistic person perceives different situations.

How to write a social story

Carol Gray says you will need to picture the goal, gather information, and tailor the text.

Picture the goal

Consider the social story's purpose. For example, the goal may be to teach a child to cover their mouth when coughing.

Now think about what the child needs to understand to achieve this goal. For example, they need to understand why covering their mouth when coughing is important, ie it stops germs from being spread which may make other people sick.

Gather information

Collect information about the situation you want to describe in your social story. Where does the situation occur? Who is it with? How does it begin and end? How long does it last? What actually happens in the situation and why? If it is for a situation where a particular outcome is not guaranteed, use words like 'sometimes' and 'usually' in the story.

Stories should appeal to the interests of the person they are written for and avoid using words that may cause the person anxiety or distress. The content and presentation of social stories should be appropriate to the person's age and level of understanding. Use age-appropriate photographs, picture symbols or drawings with text to help people who have difficulty reading or for younger children.

Gather information about the person including their age, interests, attention span, level of ability and understanding.

Tailor the text

- A social story needs to have a title, introduction, body and conclusion.
- It should use gentle and supportive language.
- It should answer six questions: where, when, who, what, how and why?
- It should be made up of descriptive sentences, and may also have coaching sentences. A descriptive sentence accurately describes the context, such as where the situation occurs, who is there, what happens and why.

How to use social stories

Carol Gray has developed guidelines on how to use social stories effectively.

Think about ways to aid comprehension - would adding questions help, or replacing some text with blanks for the person to fill in?

Find ways to support the story, eg create poster with a key phrase from the story.

Plan how often, and where, the story will be shared with the person.

Present the social story to the person at a time when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed, using a straightforward approach, eg I have written this story for you. It is about thunderstorms. Let's read it together now.

Monitor how well the story is received and whether it is working as intended.

Keep your stories organised in a ringbinder or computer folder. This makes them easier to find and review, and to develop with new information.

More information on creating social stories for your child can be found here:

<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/social-stories-for-autistic-children/>

7. Books recommended by The National Autistic Society

The following books were suggested by NAS staff.

Inclusion on this list should not be considered an endorsement by NAS as these books have not been reviewed through the same rigorous process as our advice and guidance content sources.

Non-fiction

Autism and masking: how and why people do it, and the impact it can have, Helen Ellis, with Dr Felicity Sedgewick and Dr Laura Hull

Safeguarding autistic girls: strategies for professionals, Dr Carly Jones MBE

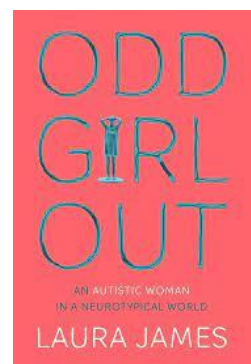
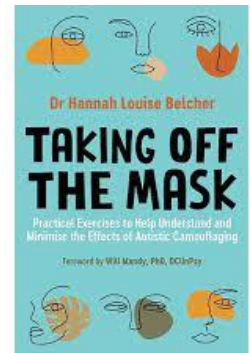
Spectrum women, Barb Cook and Dr Michelle Garnett (editors)

Supporting spectacular girls: a practical guide to developing autistic girls' wellbeing and self-esteem, Helen Clarke

Taking off the mask: practical exercises to help understand and minimise the effects of autistic camouflaging, Hannah Belcher

The independent woman's handbook for super safe living on the autistic spectrum; The autism-friendly guide to periods; The autism-friendly guide to self-employment, Robyn Steward

Women and girls with autism spectrum disorder, Sarah Hendrickx



Autobiography

Drama queen: one autistic woman and a life of unhelpful labels, Sara Gibbs

Odd girl out: an autistic woman in a neurotypical world, Laura James

Travelling by train: the journey of an autistic mother, Laurie Morgan

Fiction

A Kind of Spark, Elle McNicoll

Can You See Me?, Libby Scott and Rebecca Westcott



8. What should I do if I think my child is autistic?

If you are worried your child may be autistic, talk to your child's class teacher. From here, you can discuss your concerns, hear how your child is functioning in the school setting and create a plan of support using Trafford's Graduated Approach:

<https://www.trafforddirectory.co.uk/kb5/trafford/fsd/site.page?id=5uJQQoGo3bo>

After an initial meeting with your child's class teacher, we will use quality first teaching strategies to support your child in the classroom and we will then review this support together after one term. If we feel further support is needed, we will have another meeting with the SENCO to discuss next steps. This might include a more specialised provision, a referral to SENAS, speech and language or the TASC pathway to explore a diagnosis of autism.

It is important to build a network of support as this can be a worrying time for many as parents embark at the start of a journey they didn't anticipate to be on. You might have a lot of questions and want to talk to other parents who are in a similar position. I recommend joining the Facebook groups below for peer support:



Stronger Together Empowering Parents STEP Trafford

579 likes • 702 followers



Special Parents in Trafford - Trafford Parents Forum

1.8K likes • 2.1K followers

Trafford's Local Offer

Trafford's Local Offer is a great tool to find further information, advice and local support service for people with autism, parent carers of children or young people with autism. You can find many more services, activities, things to do and a wide range of SEND advice and guidance on Trafford's SEND Local Offer.

https://www.trafforddirectory.co.uk/kb5/trafford/fsd/advice.page?id=5W9xRU_P_7U

Post Diagnostic Support

If your child or young person has an autism diagnosis there are lots of organisations that offer support. You might need different types of support at different times in your life.

Riding the Rapids (RTR)

RTR is a ten-week group intervention aimed at helping parents/carers of children aged up to 14 with additional needs to positively understand and manage their child's behaviour, improving quality of life and equipping families with skills to take on their journey with them. Designed for parents/carers of children with learning disabilities and/or autism the group materials can be adapted to support parents/carers of children in specialist or in mainstream provision. The course is divided into different modules including:

- understanding the function of behaviour that challenges
- making environmental changes to support positive behaviour
- developing strategies to promote positive behaviour based on this understanding
- promoting positive attachments through better communication and play
- supporting parents/carers self-care and promoting parental coping and wellbeing.

- Based on well researched principles of functional analysis, the course aims to give parents/carers strategies to help them in that moment in time, as well as skills they can apply to future challenges.

Email - Emma.bamlett@trafford.gov.uk

I hope you've found this month's newsletter useful and as always, if you have any suggestions for future newsletters, please let me know!

Best wishes,

Mrs McLoughlin

SENCO