



Breakspeare School Provision for Pupils with Autism

Provision for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders at Breakspeare School

Breakspeare School is a special school for children with severe learning difficulties (age range 3-19 years). Twenty five percent of the children at the school also have Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.

Autism 'unpacked'

Autism is characterised by impairments in social interaction, communication and flexibility of thought and behaviour. These common features of the condition are described as the 'Triad of impairments' Wing (1996). Research now shows that ninety seven percent of pupils with autism will also have a sensory processing disorder. This means that they cannot take in information through their senses and filter it effectively. The children who come to our school also always have co-existing severe learning difficulties. This means that their ability to understand speech and written word is often limited and we need to use different means of communication in order to help them.

Communication difficulties

When Parents notice there is something wrong and their child is not developing, it is often a lack of effective communication that they report.

Children with autism struggle with meaning and even though they may say words, often it is clear they do not understand what they mean. People with autism have a very literal understanding of language and do not 'get' abstract nuances. To tell someone with autism to 'keep their eyes peeled' when out looking for squirrels for example may cause them to become very upset because they think you mean exactly what you say. People with autism find using emotion as a reference for language very difficult. They prefer to use cognition or thought. They do not generally recognise emotion and this affects their communicative play. Gestures and facial expressions are confusing to them so that, for example when you touch the oven and pull a pained expression and say 'hot', they will not share in the understanding of what hot is and may continue to touch the oven.

Parents may also have noticed that their young child with autism does not use the early communication skills they would expect to see in a child of this age. They do not take turns, or seem to notice or share enjoyment in Mum or Dad's attempts at play. Parents have described it as like playing a game with yourself all the time.

Social understanding

People with autism struggle to understand social rules. They may refuse to give eye contact or allow touch or they may touch too much or not respect personal space. They may develop behaviours that are socially unacceptable such as spitting or shouting. The reason for this are two fold. Firstly, impaired ability to share emotions means they just do not understand why social rules are important. Secondly they also often suffer from fears and anxieties which mean that social rules are no longer important to them. They are simply driven to keep themselves 'safe' and in control. This in turn can lead to them developing obsessive behaviours. When such behaviour is coupled to the fact that so many children with an ASD are difficult to comfort when upset, these fears can cause bewilderment and distress to parents.

Inflexible thought and behaviour

People with autism tend to develop a ridged view of the world. As they find life so confusing, they tend to concentrate on objects which are familiar. They form an intense attachment to particular objects or routines and repeat play sequences over and over again. They may spend hours lining up and arranging objects or picking pieces of string. This causes extreme difficulty for parents as they find it difficult to occupy their child and are left feeling unhappy about being forced to leave them to play alone because they cannot gain their attention with the kinds of toys and activities other children seem to enjoy so readily.

Sensory processing

People with autism find using information from their senses challenging. They can become quickly overwhelmed by sights, sounds, touch, tastes, smells and movement or they may not be able to access sensory experiences and this may cause them to be lethargic and difficult to motivate.

Sleeping, feeding and toileting.

Difficulties with the above are likely to last longer and be more persistent in children with autism. They may refuse to eat or eat only certain foods and in certain orders. They may be resistant to toileting programmes and may not be able to sleep right through the night.

How we can help

At Breakspeare we are aware of the need to provide for the specific needs of these children. We are equipped to deal with children who come to us with an existing diagnosis of autism. We also recognise the importance of being able to identify the condition. We include training on autistic spectrum disorders in our induction programme for teachers and support staff. We have an ASD qualified, specialist teacher who works actively with teachers to assist them in writing programmes for children with ASD. This teacher also works with parents to assist them in setting up programmes to help with specific issues such as feeding and toileting at home.

Our principles and approach

Our school motto is 'Opportunity with Dignity'. We strive to encourage children with autism to learn in a supportive and understanding learning environment designed to take their specific needs into consideration.

We aim to be an 'ASD friendly' school by having a clear, uncluttered and visually supportive learning environment. We work very hard to ensure that expectations of pupils are consistent and clear. We understand the need to provide visual support and clear language, personal space for pupils and low sensory stimulation areas so that pupils have a place to go to if they need 'time out'. However we are also committed to encouraging our pupils with ASD to become as independent as possible. We teach the pupils strategies for coping so that they can go out into the community and access a full curriculum.

Communication for children with ASD at Breakspeare

Children with ASD often have difficulties in understanding speech. They may not give good eye contact. All staff use the 'Sign Along' signing system as they speak to encourage the children to look and thus increase attention and listening abilities. This helps pupils with autism to focus on speech.

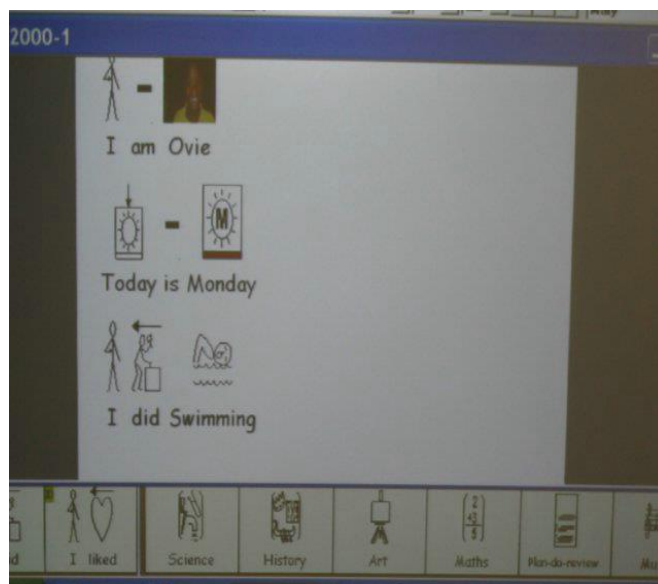
When pupils cannot speak they often respond well to learning to communicate their needs by using pictures. We use Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) with many of our children. In this way they can begin to see the point of communicating by learning to choose what they want to eat, drink or play with:



Choosing photographs used in a PECS system.

Reading

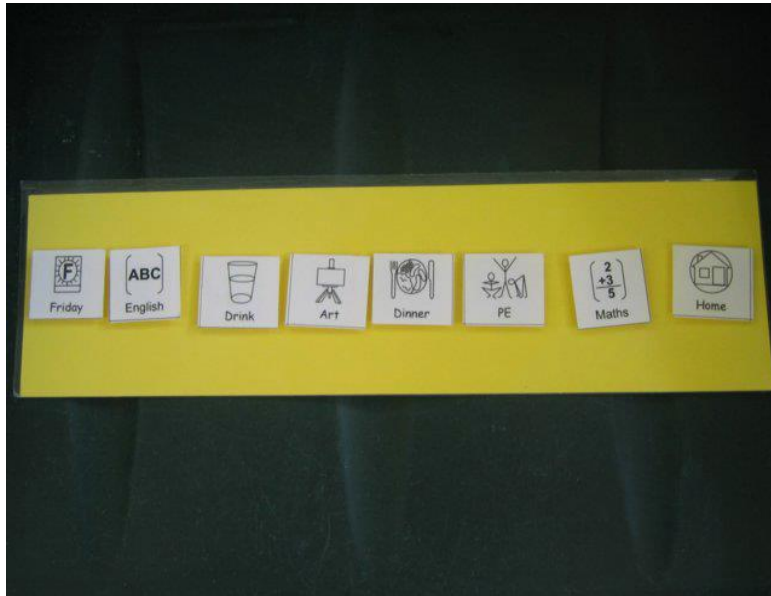
We can use these pictures as a way in to reading for our pupils. We encourage them to match the photographs to symbols that mean the same thing. Eventually many of our pupils with autism learn to read and communicate through the use of symbols:



Working with symbols in order to communicate

Support for Positive Behaviour

Children with autism often need a great deal of structure and sameness in order to function well. They dislike change and need to know exactly what will happen in the day. We use visual schedules in order to help the children to maintain their awareness of the timetable. Many of our children have individual schedules with their own special interests built into them so that pupils can learn to do their work and then get a reward for this.



The above shows a schedule that spans a day.



The above shows one of the children choosing her favoured activities within a break time routine.

Individual learning areas

Children with autism need their own space and we often set up what we call work stations for them. These work stations contain the children's work and will be visually uncluttered, clear, calm spaces for the children to work in or come back to if they are feeling stressed or upset.



The above work station includes a set of drawers with work clearly labelled, it illustrates how clear and uncluttered the work stations are.

Many pupils with autism exhibit challenging behaviour. We work hard to provide consistent approaches to overcoming these behaviours. The pupils have a behaviour plan which is always discussed with parents.

We are committed to working with parents where ever possible. Each child will have a home school diary through which parents and teachers can communicate. There is a behaviour coordinator who will meet with parents on request in order to discuss behavioural issues in the home.

Social issues

Many of the pupils with autism who come to our school need help to understand social rules. We employ a range of techniques in order to help them deal with this difficulty. We use our knowledge of early child development in order to encourage the children to interact and make relationships. This method is called Intensive interaction.



A young child is encouraged to give eye contact and enjoy touch through massage and play.

The pupils are encouraged and enabled to be with their peer group. They are also given many opportunities to learn to socialise in the community by going shopping or to cafes etc.

We also use techniques such as role play and social stories in order to help the children to rehearse and understand social rules. Below is an example from a recent social story written to help a pupil who finds talking quietly very difficult and who can often shout in public places:

“Class 3 are going to a café. They will have a drink and a biscuit in the café. They will all sit together. Sometimes children get excited and shout loudly. It is good to speak quietly to each other in the café. People will be impressed if we speak quietly at the table. We can shout loudly in the park on the way home.”

Often we can encourage children with autism to gain social understanding through computer programmes. Each class is equipped with computers, an interactive white board and an ipad on which we can put specific programmes to help teach pupils with autism using symbols and visual learning techniques.

Sensory diets

This term is a bit strange but it simply means that we take account of the fact that pupils with ASD may very well have a sensory processing disorder. Each pupil is assessed using a scale which shows us the sensory information they are particularly sensitive to or are in need of gaining. We then devise a sensory diet of activities that will support the pupil to overcome their sensory difficulties. When you visit the school, you may see pupils being rolled in blankets or using peanut balls as a form of relaxation and deep pressure. These activities have been proven to help calm and encourage children to manage their own condition and state of well being.

Being aware of students’ sensory integration difficulties is key in the organisation of your classroom environment.

Take account of students’ sensory processing difficulties – we provide time throughout the day for them to enter a calm, quiet space to prevent sensory overload or take part in calming, deep pressure activities, such as using weighted blankets, the peanut ball, having deep massage.



Timetabled sessions in our quiet learning room (distraction free, low stimulation room) are available for those students who struggle to function effectively for long periods in the classroom.

Our curriculum

We have a varied and rich curriculum. We work hard to enable our children with autism to access the curriculum. Our curriculum documents have been praised by OFSTED for their appropriateness to all our pupils. Our curriculum documents are designed to take into account the specific needs of pupils with autism. Our teaching and Learning Policy indicates the specific needs and provision for children with autism.

We have a swimming pool and a gymnasium equipped with a soft play room and a trampoline. Children with autism are encouraged to access school trips and local amenities.

There is a full and extensive transition programme for pupils when they are preparing to leave school at the age of nineteen.

References and useful addresses

Signalong

Breakspeare runs courses using qualified instructors. Parents are welcome

Picture Exchange Communication systems

Bondy, A and Frost, L. (1994) The Delaware autistic program, in SL Harris and JS Handleman (Eds) *Preschool education programs for children with autism*. Austin: Pro-Ed

Individual schedules

Mesibov, G and Howley, M. (2003) *Accessing the Curriculum for Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder*,. London: David Fulton

General reading

Jones, G. (2002) *Educational Provision for Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome Meeting Their Needs*, London: David Fulton.

Jordan, R. (2001) *Autism With Severe Learning Difficulties*, London: Souvenir Press

Williams, D. (1996) *Autism: an inside out Approach*, London: Jessica Kingsley

Wing, L. (1996) *The Autistic Spectrum*, London: Robinson

NAS (The National Autistic Society) Online at <http://www.nas.org.uk>