

AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS

What are Autistic Spectrum Disorders?

Autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) are a range of related developmental disorders that begin in childhood and persist throughout adulthood.

ASD can cause a wide range of symptoms, which are grouped into three broad categories:

- **Problems and Difficulties with Social Interaction** - such as a lack of understanding and awareness of other people's emotions and feelings.
- **Impaired Language and Communication Skills** - such as delayed language development and an inability to start conversations or take part in them properly.
- **Unusual Patterns of Thought and Physical Behaviour** - this includes making repetitive physical movements, such as hand tapping or twirling. The child develops set routines of behaviour, which if broken or changed, can upset the child.

There is currently no cure for ASD, but there are a range of treatments and approaches that can improve the symptoms listed above.

Types of ASD

The term 'spectrum' is used because the symptoms of ASD can vary from child to child, and range from mild to severe.

In very broad terms, there are three main types of ASD:

- Autistic Disorder, sometimes known as 'classic autism'
- Asperger Syndrome
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) which is also known as 'atypical' autism

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autistic-spectrum-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

How an Occupational Therapist May Help..

Occupational Therapy (OT) can help a child/young person with an ASD to participate in activities within their daily lives that they need to do and/or want to do. Working closely with families and schools, an OT may provide any of the following interventions depending on the individual's needs and goals:

- **Sensory Assessment-** Advice and equipment to help increase attention and concentration, reduce sensitivities and improve their ability to process sensory information for improved participation in activities.
- **Motor Skills Assessments** - Many children with ASD experience difficulties with their balance, postural skills and coordination. Fine motor difficulties may also be present.
- **Advice and Strategies** - To support their development and/or participation in self care tasks. This may include the provision of equipment, advice regarding sensory processing and ways of teaching and learning the skills and activities to help develop underlying skills e.g. fine motor skills.

Case Example

Amy is a 12 year old girl who attends a special educational needs school. She was referred to the OT service due to having a limited diet, refusing to brush her teeth and appearing to be on the go all of the time.

OT assessed Amy and found that she was experiencing difficulties regulating her own activity levels and when in the classroom she appeared to need to be on the move. Amy was also found to have sensitivities to touch, which was making certain textures of food and having a tooth brush in her mouth almost painful for her. This was leaving her in a state of high anxiety.

OT provided advice to Amy, her family and her school regarding sensory processing and how this was impacting on Amy's daily life. Amy was provided with a programme of activities to help her to respond appropriately to light and unexpected touch more appropriately. To ensure Amy was getting the movement opportunities she required in a structured way, activity ideas were implemented in her school, in line with

her visual timetable. Amy was also given a 'sit fit' cushion to help her sit for longer periods.

Having an understanding of Amy's sensory needs helped her, her family and the school staff to put in place strategies and activities to reduce her anxiety. Amy is now able to sit for longer periods, she is beginning to tolerate different textures of food and is tolerating an electric toothbrush in her mouth. Amy is no longer as anxious as those around her are more aware that she may not like to be touched unexpectedly, she may not like to stand at the front of a line or complete gluing tasks in class.

Useful contacts

- <http://www.autism.org.uk/> - National Autistic Society site - social stories about toileting as well as other resources.
- <http://www.augura.com/> - Advice on autism
- <http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/> The Challenging Behaviour Foundation provides advice for children and adults with severe learning disabilities.
- <http://www.bild.org.uk> - British Institute of Learning Disabilities
- <http://www.freewebs.com/cafaq> - Coventry Action for Autism Group
- <http://www.sissel.com> - For purchase of sit fits
- <http://www.rompa.com> - for a variety of sensory toys and equipment
- <http://www.sensetoys.com>

Relevant Occupational Therapy Home Programmes available for members on the website

- ASD pack
- Self care
- Sensory skills

- Play skills
- School skills
- Attention