

Autism and Strategies to Support Effective Communication

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So, what is Autism?

- Autism is a neurological difference that impacts how a person develops.
- It affects how people communicate and interact with the world.
- One in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK.
- Autism comes in different levels of severity – it is referred to as a spectrum.
- It is often described as seeing the world through a different lens.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4G0H1U8Jl>

(Stop at 2.48min)

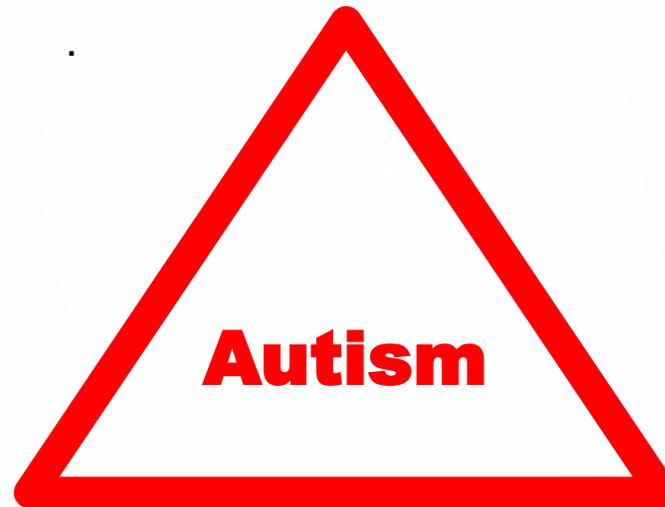
A Triad of Differences

Communication and Interaction

- Difficulty expressing themselves: Impaired and deviant language (verbal or non-verbal)
- Difficulty understanding what is being communicated to them
- Very literal understanding of language
- Poor social understanding
- Difficulty understanding the feelings of others
- Lack of social interaction (may actively avoid others)
- Difficulty making eye-contact when communicating (may have a peripheral gaze or look down at the floor)

Sensory Processing

- Difficulty processing sensory information, such as touch, smell, hearing, taste, vision, body balance and body awareness
 - Some individuals may react more strongly to these (hyper-sensitive), while others may seek these stimulations (hypo-sensitive)
 - Could present as flapping of hands, body rocking or shouting



Flexibility of Thinking and Information Processing

- Rigidity of thought and behaviour
- Reliance on routines
- Ritualistic behaviour
- Delay in processing information
- Intense interest on specific topic or areas
- Can have a lack of imaginativeness and creativity, resulting in repetition

“I’m not naughty, I’m Autistic.”

He's Not
Naughty!

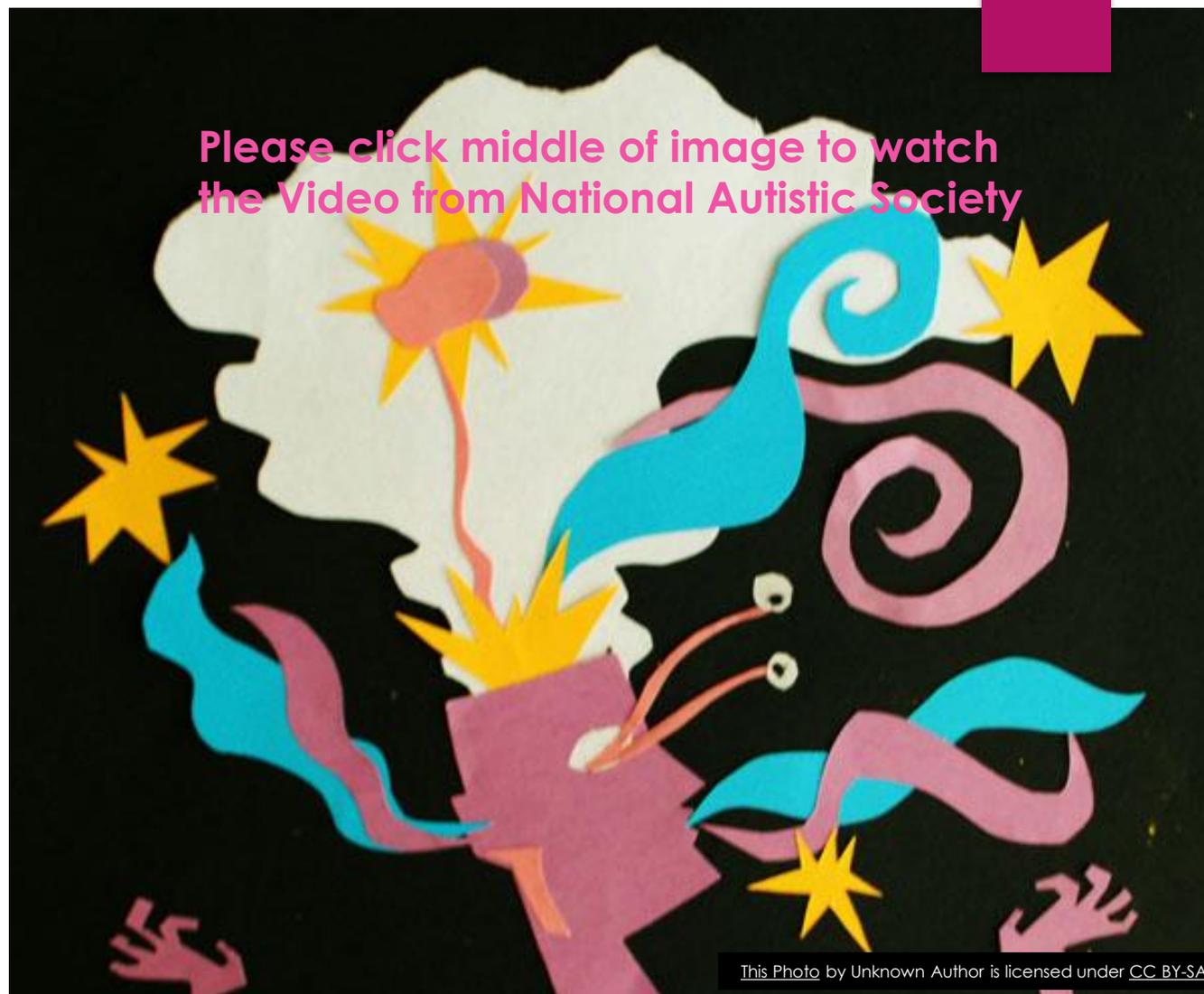
Please click middle of image to watch
the Video from National Autistic Society



A Children's guide to Autism

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Information
overload!



Effective Support and Communication: Top Ten Tips!

1. Provide routine and structure. Give notice of changes whenever possible.
2. Decide which side walker is going to take the lead on communication for the lesson.
3. Use the riders name before giving an instruction. When the coach gives a group instruction, a side walker should repeat the instruction putting the rider's name before it.
4. Support the riders ability to complete the activity by providing instructions in chunks, e.g. First, Then, Next. This can be done by the coach and then repeated by the side walker if necessary. Provide the rider with plenty of time to process the instruction – known as 'take-up time'.
5. Check the rider's understanding of the activity by asking them to repeat the steps back to you, e.g. "Tell me what you need to do first."
6. Use direct, non-ambiguous language, .e.g. Not: "Can you pick up the bean bag?" but: "Now pick up the bean bag."

Effective Support and Communication: Top Ten Tips!

7. Do not be tempted to answer questions for the rider. If they appear to be having difficulty formulating a response, provide scaffolding e.g. A rider cannot name the part piece of tack: "Is it a saddle or a bridle?"
8. Riders with Autism will often have difficulty in making choices; offer 2 choices max. Those with a high level of need, especially those who are non-verbal, should be encouraged to point to what they want when necessary.
9. If you notice any flapping, rocking or fidgeting, consider what the rider may be communicating. It could be excitement but it could be a sign of heightened anxiety or a physical sensory issue. If the rider is not able to communicate how they are feeling/ the problem verbally, use non-verbal cues, e.g. thumbs up or thumbs down. Mood cards could also be used.
10. Introduce visuals for the high-needs riders with Autism, for example a simple 'Left arrow' and 'Right arrow' laminated card for the side walker to use to indicate when they need to be turning their pony left or right, or what a photo of good sitting position in the saddle or a photo of a bean bag (so they understand what they need to pick up).

The impact of riding lessons on children and young adults with Autism – research evidence

Why?

“Horses are known to prefer the same routine, the same stall, the same path or route, and the same habits, similar to children with autism,” wrote L. Eugene Arnold. “More importantly, horses are content to be guided by nonverbal communication but are amenable to verbal instruction, allowing children to experience and practise the power of communication by controlling a much stronger force than themselves in ways within their repertoire.”

Learning Disability Today (2018)

 Always

 Unique

 *Totally*

 INTERESTING

 Sometimes

 Mysterious