

Understanding Autism

April 2nd is World Autism Awareness Day. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to take the time to consider what we know about Autism, to learn new information and to be able to embrace differences.

Approximately 1 in every 160 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is very likely that you know someone in your school, family or community who has Autism.

Autism, the early signs

Autism is a complex, life-long developmental disability which is neurobiological in origin. Approximately one in every 160 children in Australia is diagnosed with an ASD. One of the first signs, which can alert a parent to the fact that their child is not developing in a typical way, is the manner in which their young child responds to them. Their child may not learn to speak or have very limited speech. Their child may also have great difficulty in comprehending the speech of others.

Some children with Autism can develop good spoken language. However, their language is very concrete and literal; it lacks a social quality and is not used in a conversational manner. Parents may notice that their young toddler with Autism does not seem interested in playing with other children. They may also notice that their child is not playing with toys in an imaginative way. Instead, their child may spend time placing toys in neat lines; or engaging in the same sequence of play activity over and over again. Autism presents differently for each child.

Common Features of Autism

- Impaired social interaction e.g. a lack of spontaneous interest in sharing in activities or interests with others; or lack of appropriate social responsiveness.
- Lack of or limited make-believe play.
- Communication challenges—Some children may be non-verbal, while others are very verbal but use language in an unusual way’.
- Impaired ability to initiate or sustain a conversation.
- Distress, or difficulty, with change to a routine.
- Narrow and restricted range of interests e.g. may have a preoccupation with an object; may only be interested in lining up objects or making collections of particular items; may only be interested in a single topic or amassing facts about a single interest.

Strengths of Autism

Children with Autism enjoy routines and predictability. They have great attention to detail. Although social situations are difficult, children with autism form strong bonds with people who they are close to.

Positive Outcomes

Children do not grow out of Autism. However, with appropriate intervention they can be assisted to gain many of the skills we take for granted—skills such as learning to play, communicating and responding to others in a social way.

Children with Autism benefit enormously from programs which provide them with a means to communicate and to develop the skills they need to participate in everyday life. With appropriate education, and the support of dedicated people, the child with Autism can go on to lead a fulfilled life, engaging in social activities and vocational pursuits in later life.

Top 10 Tips—Resources and support to allow children with Autism to thrive in your class

1. Provide structure, routine and predictability.
2. Have a set transition routine at the start and end of each day.
3. Know the student’s strengths and interests.
4. Develop a positive and trusting relationship. People with Autism need contact everyday with someone who cares about them and shows fondness for them.
5. Use individualised and whole class visual supports to increase understanding and independence.
6. Implement a break system to allow the student to maintain their ability to participate throughout the day.
7. Explicitly teach new skills. Help the student to learn what to do rather than focus on what not to do.
8. Use a reward/reinforcement system to motivate and encourage your student to learn new skills. Extend the student gradually and fade this as they learn new skills.
9. Provide preparation and warning to help the student anticipate change.
10. Support the student’s communication and sensory needs.