INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

ADDvanced Solutions
Supporting you to find the answers

The Impact on Learning for pupils living with Autism

Children, young people and adults living with Autism have difficulties with their executive functioning abilities. This means they will struggle with planning, organising, sequencing and self-monitoring and also developing complex skills such as writing. This adds up to an enormous impact on their ability to function in a learning environment.

Social Interaction and Communication

Difficulties with social interaction can cause major barriers to learning. For example, individuals with ASD often take statements very literally, a teacher stating 'this textbook is absolutely useless' might result in the pupil refusing to believe anything contained in the book!

They will have difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal communication and may find it difficult to communicate their needs and intentions to teachers and to other pupils

Pupils with autism may also find it hard to interpret the tone of voice and body language of others which can lead to misunderstandings.

Misunderstanding instructions can mean a lot of time may be spent on unnecessary activities.

In addition, some individuals with autism can be perfectionist, which can lead to anxiety, frustration and a reluctance to move on from one learning activity to another before they feel they have finished.

Inflexible Thinking

Pupils with ASD may be unable to see a situation from another's perspective, which can make group activities difficult, and some teaching strategies that rely on group work will be ineffective.

However, working in pairs can be very effective if this is set up thoughtfully.

Pupils will find it hard to move from one activity to another without support or warning.

One aspect of the inflexibility of thought in autism is the ability to focus on a specific area of interest. This differs with each individual, but it is very rewarding if a child's special interest can be woven into the lesson. Perhaps they could use it as project material, or inspiration for story-writing or art.

Sensory Issues

Sensory issues can be a major barrier to learning for children on the autistic spectrum, as with many neurodevelopmental conditions. For example, elevated levels of noise, certain smells or just being in close proximity to other pupils could significantly impact on learning for some pupils.

Use an individual sensory profile with the pupil to enable you to help them avoid particularly difficult sensory experiences.

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Anxiety

Individuals on the autistic spectrum generally have heightened levels of anxiety and stress, which can result in reactive and explosive behaviour. Seemingly small issues can take them beyond the level at which they can manage their stress and this can result in a 'meltdown'.

Supporting the young person around change and building and maintaining a positive relationship will help to reduce their anxiety and to remain in a place where they are able to learn.

Gentle humour (not sarcasm) is a great tool in a teacher's toolkit to defuse tension and keep anxiety levels low.

Modelling calm and restraint under pressure is a very valuable skill for a teacher to pass on to a pupil.

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