

Working with adults, children and young people with additional needs: An Introduction to Autism

We hope that you will find this 'introduction' leaflet helpful. It is not intended to replace conversations that you will need to have with children, young people, their families, and the professionals who know them. Those conversations are essential to understand the uniqueness of each family member you work with to ensure that you can engage with them in the most meaningful and supportive way. Links to relevant charities, information services and research are embedded at the end of this leaflet.

Autism is often referred to as ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism is a lifelong developmental disability; it is not a learning disability although around half of autistic people may also have a learning disability. Many people who fit the profile for Asperger's syndrome are now being diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Each person is different, and it is up to the individual how they choose to identify.

Autism is a spectrum condition and affects different people in different ways. Autistic people may struggle with social communication and social interactions, changes to routine, over or under sensitivity to sensory experiences (for example, background music or lighting), or extreme anxiety. Autistic people may also have intense and focussed interests from an early age, some of which change, and others are lifelong. Autistic people can also experience meltdowns or shutdowns, which can be intense and exhausting. Meltdowns in children can often be mistaken for tantrums or bad behaviour when they occur in public, and this can be especially hard for families who may feel unfairly judged by members of the public.

Autistic women and girls are often better at masking their difficulties, and more men and boys are diagnosed as autistic. It's been argued that the tools available for diagnosing girls with autism show an inherent gender bias and this is something that is being explored further to ensure that women and girls are assessed appropriately.

Within the autism community the use of person-first language (children with autism) or identity-first language (autistic children) is heavily debated. Many autistic people prefer identity-first language as they see being autistic as part of their identity not an addition to it. However, person-first language may be someone's individual preference or the preference of their family/caregivers. Asking a child, young person, or adult how they would prefer to be described is essential. For the purpose of this information sheet, identity-first language will be used throughout.

How am I unique?
What makes me different
from other young people?



Planning for meetings, interviews and direct work

An autistic child, young person or adult may need you to adjust how you would usually undertake direct work, interviews or observations of time spent with their family. It is important that you establish what they need from you to make this an effective piece of work. Speaking with the child, young person or adult and their family members and the professionals who know them will guide your planning. **These are some general tips to think about:**

- ✓ Make sure you understand how the child, young person or adult is individually impacted by their autism. You may need to make adjustments to the physical environment you are meeting with them in, for example removing some of the toys or taking down a wall clock.
- ✓ When deciding whether in person or remote working is more appropriate, you need to be sure whichever you choose will allow you the opportunity to understand their needs and enable them to engage meaningfully. It is important to ask if they have a preference.
- ✓ Sharing your plan for the interview and any practice aides may be particularly significant for some children, young people and adults. Ensuring they understand what you will be talking about, what practice aides you will be using and why, may help them engage more and be less anxious.
- ✓ Think about using different communication practice aides (more on these below).
- ✓ Let them take the lead to set the pace - listen.
- ✓ Give enough time for the direct work, interview or observation of contact.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to be creative.



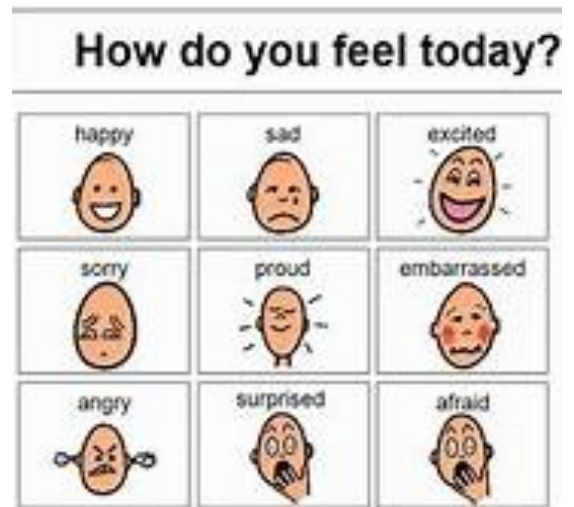
Alternative Methods of Communication

Widgets and other picture exchange systems, for example PECS, are symbols and images that can help with communication. These can be customised for an individual and can include words as well as pictures. They can be used creatively to ask questions about likes, dislikes and wishes, as well as used to communicate wants and needs. Links to websites with information on these communication systems can be found at the end of this document.

Social stories may be an effective method of communicating with an autistic child or young person. Social stories are a short description of a particular situation, event or activity including specific information about what to expect and why. They present information in a literal way and can be adapted to meet different needs and levels of understanding. By providing information about what may happen during an interview or visit, you can reduce potential anxiety.

The advice for social stories is to *picture the goal*, *gather information* and *tailor the text*. If you want to use social stories, then speaking with the carers and professionals who know the child or young person may help guide you. An example is below, you can also use images to support the text:

- I am going to talk to a social worker named Emma about visiting Mummy's house.
- I will go to her office. It is in town. Daddy will take me.
- I will go to the front desk, so they know I am there.
- I will wait in a waiting room until it is my turn to see Emma.
- When it is my turn, I will go into the office with Emma. Daddy will stay in the waiting room.
- Emma will ask how I am feeling. She will ask me questions about what I do when I am at home with Daddy. She will ask me questions about what I do when I am visiting Mummy. I need to tell Emma the truth.
- Emma will write things down on her computer.
- If I feel angry or upset, I can tell Emma and we will stop.



Introducing Yourself to Children & Families

The templates for the introductory letters are editable. These letters can be sent to a child to introduce yourself and share details about the purpose of your interview/visit. Use of pictures and images is appropriate in these letters, particularly when working with very young children. All information should be provided in accessible formats.

If a letter is not appropriate, think about how you can introduce yourself in advance of the interview. Would a call or video call be useful?

After the direct work/interview has finished it is important to know how your recommendations to the court and the outcome of any hearing will be shared with the child. Would they like you to write to them again or use other ways of communicating? Is this best communicated via solicitors, family members or professionals, and if so, why? 'Easy read' letters and judgements are becoming more widespread within the family court and you can advocate for these from the judges and magistrates.

These outcome letters can form a valuable part of a child's life story work. Even if the child cannot understand the letter at their current age or developmental stage it is something they may be able to understand as they get older.

Safeguarding:

Children, young people and adults with additional needs are at greater risk of abuse due to communication barriers, the signs of abuse being misunderstood or minimised, increased isolation and greater dependence on others for their care, a lack of education to help them to stay safe, and inadequate support. It is important to work proactively to protect vulnerable children and adults, be professionally curious and respectfully challenge others if we have concerns.

How can you be sure you're making the right adjustments?

The short answer is you can't. However, if you're flexible and willing to try different approaches, you're far more likely to succeed.



Using Cafcass Direct Work Practice Aides

Cafcass direct work practice aides are designed to be used with all children, young people and adults. Here are some tips and ideas to help you use them:

- Limit the number of 'pages' or screens you are using from the practice aides. This allows for clear questioning with visual support. Don't try to complete the entire practice aide unless this is something the child or young person wants to do and can manage.
- Share the sections of the practice aide you intend to use in advance of the session. This could include sharing them with educators or support staff. They may be able to offer guidance to you about how best to engage with the child, young person, or adult.
- Include pictures or images in letters to the judge. These may convey the message the child or young person wants to communicate effectively and will allow the court to hear their voice.
- The 'Dictate' software can be used to allow the child to interact directly and see their own words on the page.
- Don't feel you need to do all the direct work yourself. Adults that the child or young person are familiar with may be key to helping you understand how best to communicate. Working alongside educators, carers and support staff may provide opportunities to amplify a child's voice in a way that you could not do alone.
- [Cafcass resources for professionals](#)

Remember, connection before content.

The importance of planning and relationship building cannot be underestimated.

Mencap- [What is Autism and Asperger's Syndrome? | Mencap](#)

National Autistic Society- [Professionals \(autism.org.uk\)](#)

National Centre for High Functioning Autism- [Research at the National Centre for High Functioning Autism | Great Ormond Street Hospital \(gosh.nhs.uk\)](#)

PECS- [My PECS - Free PECS Cards and Images](#)

Signalong- [Signalong - The Communication Charity](#)

Makaton- [Home \(makaton.org\)](#)

Widgit- [Widgit Software | Widgit Symbols Help Communication](#) and [Widgit SymbolWorld: Categories : index](#)