

Tips for engaging people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in your sessions

ASD is a lifelong disability related to brain development that affects the way a person experiences and understands their environment and other people. The term spectrum disorder suggests a graduated scale, but autistic symptoms vary greatly between individuals; it is more useful to think of them as a constellation of symptoms relating to an individual. People with ASD can benefit and learn from the right kind of support.

The following points summarise many of the characteristics of people with ASD.

Not everyone on the autism spectrum will have all of these characteristics, however, all autistic people have difficulties with communication and interacting with other people. This is as true for the post graduate maths student with Asperger syndrome as for the autistic person with severe learning disabilities. As a coach you can discover how best to help a participant by learning how ASD affects them and what they want from their time at RDA.



Possible characteristics of individuals with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)

- Difficulty understanding social interaction and responding as expected
- May appear aloof and indifferent to others because of avoiding eye contact and seeming to ignore communication
- Unaware of others' feelings towards them and the impact of their behaviour on others
- Apparent insensitivity to peers
- No concept of their role within a group.
- Little or no perception of danger.
- Resistant to change in order to feel safe
- Poor physical/motor skills.
- Obsessions with specific objects or subjects
- Anxiety e.g. about getting lost, departure from routine & not knowing what to expect
- Depression
- Inability to transfer skills from one situation to another.
- Challenging behaviour.
- Self-injury/self-harm
- Repetitive movements such as arm flapping and spinning

- May repeat/echo words or phrases with or without understanding
- Inappropriate laughing or giggling.
- Sensory issues e.g. experiencing sounds and touch as painful. Finding flashing light completely distracting.
- May experience a sensory overload in a stimulating environment e.g. crowded supermarket with music
- Difficulty expressing themselves
- Failure to respond to their name (unless looking at them).
- Failure to comply with general instructions when given to a whole group. May need much more time to process communication
- Difficulty understanding verbal communication. Prone to take language literally e.g. 'please take a chair'
- Cannot recognise jokes or sarcasm
- Difficulty understanding non-verbal communication such as tone of voice, facial expression, body language
- Poor concept of sharing, waiting in line, taking turns. Children with ASD often choose to play alone
- Struggles with creative tasks and 'thinking outside the box'
- Disinhibited, will say things without hesitation that others realise are likely to cause offence, hurt or embarrassment

These traits are challenges but some can also be strengths e.g. directness, ability to single-mindedly focus, preoccupation with counting etc.



Engaging people with ASD in your coaching sessions

- Take the time to learn about your participant with ASD. What do they want? What interests them? What are their strengths and challenges? What gives them pleasure? Is there a care plan in place for them? Use what you learn to shape your approach and session content
- Use their name at the beginning of an instruction or question.
- Use positive phrasing e.g. by saying what to do rather than what not to do.
- Use face-to-face interaction when possible.
- Use visual communication when possible and be flexible to adjust to the participant.
- Help your participant to anticipate what will happen next (e.g. 'When the ball is passed to Ben, who will Ben pass to?').
- Give warnings of any changes that are about to happen (e.g. 'John, in a few minutes, we will be moving on to a game').
- Control the environment and be aware of distraction (e.g. face them away from any distractions) and sensory overstimulation e.g. with music

- Teach them the necessary rules and boundaries and use prompts/reminders to reinforce them.
- Provide a definite beginning and end to activities.
- Reduce anxiety with a confident and positive approach; the participant will feel safer knowing that if they lose control, you won't.
- Provide a safe place and/or person the participant can go to when a situation becomes too much for them to cope with.
- Think about teaching social skills in games e.g. if a participant doesn't relate to the pony, encourage them to thank the pony, incorporate saying excuse me when passing other riders, if the participant is impatient waiting for their turn during a relay race you can say, 'You want Tom to go faster. How can you help him go faster? Shall we cheer him?'
- If your participant is fascinated by a superhero you might refer to them in the session to 'spur them on'.

Further resources on Autism

RDA E-Learning

[Autism Awareness](#)

UK Coaching

[Practical Strategies to Use When Coaching People with Autism](#)

[Coaching People with Autism - Alison Tootill](#)

[Coaching People with Autism Series*](#)

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National Autistic Society

[Supporting autistic people with sport and physical activity](#)

A brilliant novel to read about a boy with ASD: 'The Curious Incident of the Dog and the Night-Time' by Mark Haddon. Vintage Books London. 2004

