Working with autism

Although professionals use different terms in order to diagnose autism, in the classroom, autism will impact on individuals in 4 key ways



***SPELL*** is The National Autistic Society’s framework for understanding and responding to the needs of students (children and adults) on the autism spectrum. It focuses on five principles that have been identified as vital elements of best practice in autism, and emphasises ways to change the environment and our approaches to meet the specific needs of each person.

***S***tructure

* Using timetables will help the students understand and know where they are going, on what days and what time they need to be there. Changes to timetables should be passed on as soon as possible – preferably not on the day as this can cause confusion and distress.
* Ensure all planned activities/targets are achievable – explain large tasks in small manageable chunks – with a clear start and end point.
* Where applicable use visual cues – to support understanding. Examples of previous work.
* Structure your communication. Use the student’s name first to obtain their attention before giving an instruction and allow the student time to process this before moving onto the next instruction – Or, if there are numerous instructions, using language that is clear, precise and concrete - give a clear concise bullet pointed list.

***P***ositive

* Ensure expectations are realistic and individual to the student. All work given must be achievable to ensure continued motivation and success.
* Use reward strategies (where appropriate) and motivators to ensure appropriate behaviour is continued. Use a low arousal response when dealing with inappropriate behaviours, keeping the voice at the same level (not shouting) and retain the same facial expression.
* Maintain consistency when dealing with challenging behaviours, through the use of behaviour support plans. Provide positive alternatives to behaviour, such as allowing the student a time-out when they become anxious.
* Where appropriate - identify and use a student’s strengths or special interests when planning tasks.
* Build self-esteem by creating opportunities to develop independence, have responsibility and make a contribution to the group.

***E***mpathy

* Develop student profiles to increase staff understanding of the individual. Include triggers to behaviour, phobias, motivators and anxieties. If possible try to include sensory information to understand which stimuli are highly sensitive. Considering these points will reduce stress and allow for the student to concentrate on the tasks.
* Educate staff and peers through training and sharing strategies.
* Offer practical help for problem areas – such as helping the student understand social rules in groups or settings.
* See behaviours as a means of communication – what are they trying to tell me?
* Ensure actual comprehension has been achieved; understanding may be masked through learnt phrases or fear of being different to everyone else.

***L***ow arousal

* Check environment for potential distractions specific to the individual, such as flickering lights, very strong smells or loud noises.
* Create a workstation or space free from distractions for work tasks or learning new complex skills.
* Where appropriate filter out irrelevant stimuli, for example limit the number of examples on worksheets or irrelevant diagrams.
* Use resources to address individual needs, such as ear defenders to block out loud noises or distraction devices (fidget cubes, stress balls).

***L***inks

* Where appropriate, ensure parents are involved throughout the process to help monitor progress and review targets, this could also be a time to draw up behaviour support plans – so consistency is carried throughout home and college.
* A diary could be used, for tutors and parents, to ensure vital information is passed on at home - for many students home and college are separate environments.
* Ensure all staff working with the students are informed of support strategies and current issues.
* Share information with other professionals – such as occupational therapists, educational psychologists or speech and language therapists.