

What is AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Conditions are a lifelong developmental disorder characterised by a triad of impairments, which are impairments in social interaction, communication (verbal and non verbal) and imagination. Alongside the impairments people with ASC often demonstrate repetitive behaviour patterns, narrow, obsessional interests, resistance to change, motor coordination difficulties and unusual sensitivity to their environment. Currently 1 in 110 people in the U.K have an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC). ASC can be described as a "hidden" disorder as it cannot be identified by appearance, only by behaviour.

The autism spectrum ranges from low to high functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome. The majority of people with autism have some level of learning disability and there is a higher prevalence of mental health problems, such as anxiety disorders and depression, especially amongst people with Asperger syndrome, compared to the general public. The police and the criminal justice system are more likely to come into contact with the higher functioning, more verbal people on the spectrum, as the nonverbal, lower functioning people on the spectrum are under closer supervision. However, their verbal ability masks their understanding, as they have extreme difficulty making sense of their worlds. This can occasionally lead to inappropriate behaviour, which some may find challenging, especially when the person is anxious.

This leaflet offers some quick suggestions and practical advice to all members of the police force in order to aid them to work with people with ASC.

For more information contact:

- **The Essex Autistic Society**
01206 577678
www.essexautistic.org.uk
- **The National Autistic Society**
0845 070 4004
www.nas.org.uk

Further reading:

- Adults with Autism (1996)
by Hugh Morgan.
- The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome (2006) by Tony Attwood.
- Autism: The Facts (2002)
by Simon Baron-Cohen
and Patrick Bolton.
- Children with Autism
and Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for
Practitioners and Carers (1998)
by Patricia Howlin.
- Autism, Advocates and Law Enforcement
Professionals: Recognising and Reducing
Risk Situations for People with Autism
Spectrum Disorders (2001) by
Dennis Debbaudt.

Written by Clinical Psychology Department,
The Essex Autistic Society (2006).

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The Essex Autistic Society

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Autism Spectrum Conditions



Guidelines for the Police

What to do. . .

- **DO** contact family and /or carers as soon as possible.
- **DO** keep your language simple and direct, using the person's name to get their attention and then use short sentences e.g. Sam sit down or get in the car.
- **DO** explain to the person why they are there and what you are going to do to. They may not recognise the police uniform, police car or understand what is expected of them.
- **DO** ask simple, closed and direct questions.
- **DO** use visual cues to increase understanding e.g. photos, symbols, writing, drawings, objects etc.
- **DO** allow the person extra time to process and respond to questions. If you interrupt them then they may have to start again or become overwhelmed.
- **DO** check for understanding as they are unlikely to tell you that they do not understand.
- **DO** support them if they are left in custody, as self harming behaviours can occur in times of stress and they are vulnerable around others due to their lack of social understanding.
- **DO** take into account medical issues e.g. people with ASC are at a higher risk of having seizures.
- **DO** be clear of the outcome of seeing the person i.e. what is expected of them in the future, what they are meant to/not meant to do etc.

DO STAY CALM

What not to do. . .

- **DON'T** make the person wait in a crowded, noisy room. This will increase anxiety.
- **DON'T** expect them to understand body language, gestures, tone of voice or facial expressions. Be concrete in what you say.
- **DON'T** use abstract ideas and phrases due to literal interpretation e.g. saying "jump in the car" may lead to the person physically jumping in the car.
- **DON'T** give choices due to problems with understanding.
- **DON'T** take lack of eye contact as a sign of rudeness or guilt.
- **DON'T** attempt to stop flapping, tapping, rocking, pacing etc behaviours unless it is essential.
- **DON'T** invade their personal space unless necessary. Restraint should only be used if they are a definite risk to themselves or others.
- **DON'T** ask several questions at once due to confusion.
- **DON'T** shout.
- **DON'T** believe everything they say due to problems with communication, anxiety and misunderstanding of expectations.
- **DON'T** think they are deliberately being rude or disrespectful if they talk inappropriately or on seemingly irrelevant topics. This is likely to increase in times of stress.

What to be aware of. . .

People with an Autism Spectrum Condition can be extremely sensitive to specific sensory stimuli (vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch) and this varies depending on the individual. It is important to think about the senses when talking to the person.

- **SENSITIVE VISION:** Turn off fluorescent lights where possible or flashing stimuli and be wary when using flashing sirens.
- **SENSITIVE HEARING:** Limit the amount of noise in the room e.g. close windows, turn off siren etc. Don't shout.
- **PAIN:** People with autism can have a very high pain threshold and may demonstrate an unusual response to pain, including laughter, humming, singing, taking clothes off etc. They may not tell you if they are injured, so look out for bleeding, signs of injury etc. They may also find certain touch painful, so do not touch the person, even to guide them somewhere.

A person with an Autism Spectrum Condition can easily be overloaded with sensory information in busy places, such as the front desk, where there are lots of people etc. The way in which this sensory overload is dealt with depends on the individual. It can trigger a fight or flight reaction. Some may rock, tap objects, talk incessantly, pace, repetitive questioning etc, whereas others might withdraw, place their fingers in their ears etc. These behaviours help calm the individual so it is very important not to stop these behaviours unless necessary, as this may lead to more challenging behaviour.

