P.A.C.E

NHS
Hampshire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

HOW TO SUPPORT A YOUNG PERSON WHO MAY HAVE AUTISM

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition which affects the way in which a person communicates with and relates to other people. All children with autism are different but there are some key characteristics:

- Difficulties understanding and recognising communication such as verbal language, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice and body language.
- Difficulties recognising and understanding other people's feelings and managing their own.
- Difficulties with understanding and predicting other people's intentions and behaviour, those with Autism will also find it challenging to imagine situations outside of their own routine.
- Many people with autism experience some kind of under or over sensitivity to each of the
- seven senses. (Auditory, visual, touch, taste, smell, vestibular and proprioception.) All of the above can lead to a heightened level of anxiety for individuals on the Autistic Spectrum; the condition is pervasive which means it affects every aspect of a person's life.

COMMUNICATION

- Use the child's name to get their attention before you speak.
- Be clear and specific about what you mean. For example "pick up your Lego and put it in the box" rather than "tidy up."
- If you need a message to be received, like an instruction, cut out unnecessary social language such as "do you think you could..."
- Be careful of using language that is ambiguous or requires interpretation. Some children with autistic spectrum conditions find it difficult to understand sarcasm, humour, irony, figurative language, metaphors. This can lead to the message being misunderstood and/or the child becoming confused and anxious.
- Make sure what you say matches your tone of voice, gesture, facial expression and body language. However at times of anxiety or distress reduce the "volume" of your communication to reduce arousal e.g. use less gesture, less eye contact etc.
- Tell your child what you want them to do, rather than what they shouldn't do. For example "Finish your text, then lay the table" rather than "Get off your phone"
- Give instructions in the correct order, and break down into chunks. Only give as much information as your child can cope with.
- Be careful of giving open ended choice e.g. "What do you want for tea?" You may find it better to give a choice of options "Would you like spaghetti or fish-fingers?"
- Praise and reward when things go well.

Scan this link to download the slides from this workshop.

STRUCTURE AND PREDICTABILITY

- The use of diaries, calendars, timetables and notebooks can be really helpful. Put it where it can be easily seen. Write or draw what your child can expect to happen that day, any particular events, anything they have to remember. Refer to it each day, or more frequently if necessary.
- Use pictures and drawings as well as words if your child finds this helpful. This can make the information easier to understand even if your child can read well.
- Use a calendar or timetable to agree sequences such as when to do homework, when to go on the computer, when to go to bed etc.
- If there are changes to plans let your child know in advance, discuss what will be happening instead, and change it in their diary or calendar.
- Use normal daily routines to provide structure to the day. Make sure you have a good morning routine, meal routine, bedtime routine. Having time-points in the day that always happen in the same way can provide security and reduce anxiety.

ENVIRONMENT AND ACTIVITY

- Be aware of how much sensory information there is going on e.g. sounds, smells, lights etc. Some children can find this overwhelming. Think about reducing it – turn the TV off if you are not watching it.
- Starting and finishing activities can cause difficulties. Think of ways to clearly indicate the beginning or end of something. Consider using timers to count down time to something finishing, so the child is prepared.
- Waiting and unstructured time can be difficult for children with ASC. Plan in advance for when out and about e.g. taking a book to a doctor's appointment. At home make sure your child knows the options for what they can do in free time.
- Physical exercise can be really useful in managing anxiety for all children, and especially for those with ASC.

USEFUL RESOURCES

The National Autistic Society has a great website with lots of useful information www.autism.org.uk

They have useful information sheets, such as:
Using Visual Supports: www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx
Working with behaviour: www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/guidelines.aspx

For more information and advice please call Community Access, Autism Hampshire on: 02380 766162