

Autism Q & A with Caroline Bartlett – Monday 6th March 2017

Areas of difficulty – previously known as the triad of impairments

- Communication and language (C)
- Sensory (S)
- Social interaction / awareness (SI) – limited empathy, trouble predicting ahead
- Rigidity of thought (R) – can be very rule based, unable to cope with change, need to know what's going to happen

Needs visual support (esp R)

Now on Diagnostic Statistical Manual v5 – looks at social communication & stereotypical behaviour (includes sensory difficulties and special interests such as Thomas the Tank Engine).

Dealing with Special Interests – not wanting to do things that need doing

Use 'Now and Next' tool – “Now we're going to do what we need to do and next you can do what you want to do”. Find the right motivator in order to achieve what you need to achieve.

Dealing with anxiety

For preparation for secondary school use transition plans and taster days. Take photographs of the school, use maps to help them know their way around, make lists of what they'll need on a day by day basis. If available a Virtual Learning Environment could mean homework could be e-mailed to avoid the fears of losing homework etc.

More generally, **acknowledge the anxiety**. Be pragmatic in answering their questions, talking openly and in detail if needed. Don't respond 'don't be silly'. A boy was concerned about a shoulder injury and was convinced the symptoms indicated he was having a heart attack. By looking at the facts of what a heart attack meant and creating a checklist, the factors could be ticked off one by one and consequently the evidence proved that it wasn't a heart attack.

Dealing with Empathy / executive function – not being able to predict ahead that certain actions hurt others

Decision trees are useful for helping children understand the difference between a Good and Not-so-good decision. Visual works best with autistic children, so draw it. For example if you're in by 7pm (draw a clock at 7 o'clock), then you can watch TV for half an hour (draw TV), and everyone is happy (draw smiley faces). Then draw the other 'branch'... If you're back by 7.30 (clock at 7.30), then no TV (draw TV crossed out), and you will be unhappy (draw sad faces). This can't be discussed if they're really angry, but perhaps could be revisited afterwards to discuss what went wrong.

Comic strips also work well – use 2 boxes. The first depicts the problem and the second depicts the solution. For example for a child that struggles to understand personal space, the first picture would show 2 people too close with speech bubble saying “ow you are hurting me” and sad faces. Second picture would be 2 people at arms' length and smiling faces.

Children can have hypersensitivity – don't like noise, put hands over ears to block the noise, or hyposensitivity – like noise. If trying to explain they're being too loud, can use phrases to remind such as 'classroom voice' etc. There's a visual aid for this if required.

Regarding general instruction such as 'line up nicely', avoid being too abstract. Be explicit with instructions such as 'keep your hands and feet still'.

ABC Charts

These can help do detective work on incidents, not necessarily meltdowns though. Record the day, date and time, the antecedent (what happened before the incident, but not necessarily the trigger), then the behaviour (what did they do, say what you saw) and the consequence (what was the response). The antecedent may have been a sequence of things that happened in the day/hours before (eg normal teacher away). As the picture builds up it may be an indicator of what the child is trying to gain or avoid. For example a child that likes to play inside may do something at playtime in order to be sent back inside. **Try to understand what motivates them and use that to encourage the right behaviour. Give warnings about what will happen**, eg the TV will go off at a certain time.

Visual Support – the level of this depends on the point of development of that particular child

Initially children will need a strong visual aid to indicate what is being said, eg would you like a drink (holding a cup). This can move to photos, keeping them neutral so as not to confuse as children can be quite literal. This can then move to colour drawings, then basic drawings (Rebus), then written words and finally verbal.

Letting off steam / reduce the stress bucket

"How is your engine running?". Aiming to stay at a mid-point of 'just right' in order to remain calm and cope with life. Extremes of too high (unable to keep still, concentrate) or too low (slow and sleepy) – can be linked to special interests (high being Troublesome Trucks, low being Toby, Percy). Autistic children may need help to reset their balance back to just right. What will turn the tap on to release the pressure for the child during the day? Possibly chewing, movement, bouncing, drinking icy water. Find what works for your child.

Coping with change

Social stories can help with coping with change and rigid thinking. There's a set way of doing this but it works with facts, not open to interpretation. For example what's happening tomorrow.

"Tomorrow Mrs Brown will be away (picture). This might make you feel a bit worried but she will be back on Friday. Mrs Cox will come and teach the class for one day but Mrs Brown will be back. I will try not to worry as Mrs Brown will give Mrs Cox my one page summary so she will know how to help me."

Pick your battles – work on one thing at a time.