

Supporting autistic children and adults

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them.¹ Speech and language therapists (SLTs) are integral members of the multi-agency teams that provide support to children and adults with autism.²

How speech and language therapy helps

Speech and language therapists help to assess, diagnose, and support autistic people. They work to enhance their communication skills, so that individuals with autism can effectively communicate their thoughts, needs and feelings.³ SLTs involve family members, carers and other professionals, so that they can contribute to decisions and implement communication aids and strategies that help to meet a child or adult's needs.⁴



Understanding the communication needs of autistic people

Autistic people often experience difficulties with communicating and interacting with others.⁵ They can experience difficulties with understanding language (making sense of what people say) and using language (using words and sentences to communicate). They can have difficulties understanding the non-verbal rules of good communication, such as reading social cues and knowing when to speak or listen.⁶

In some cases, people with autism have restrictive and repetitive behaviours or interests which can make communication and interaction difficult.⁷ For example, they may repeat words and sounds that they hear, have fixated interests that are atypical or intense, or insist on sameness and follow ritualised patterns.⁸

Autistic people may be sensitive to sounds, textures, food and light, which can affect their ability to interact in a social environment and impact on all aspects of their life.⁹ They often experience difficulties with social imagination and the development of interpersonal play and imagination. For example, they can have a limited range of imaginative activities, which might be copied and pursued rigidly and repetitively.¹⁰

Many autistic children are delayed in their use of language and some autistic adults do not use speech.¹¹ In these circumstances, SLTs help people with autism to use other methods of communication.

Key facts about autism

- ▶ Autism is a spectrum condition which means that while autistic people will share certain difficulties they will not all require the same level of support.
- ▶ According to the National Autistic Society, around **700,000** people are on the autism spectrum in the UK – that's more than 1 in 100 in the population.¹² If you include their families, autism is a part of daily life for **2.8 million** people.¹³
- ▶ Latest prevalence studies of autism indicate that **1.1%** of the population in the UK may have autism.¹⁴
- ▶ Despite the increased awareness, studies have shown that four out of five adults with autism find obtaining a diagnosis difficult or impossible.¹⁵



The impact of early intervention to support children with autism

A recent follow up study, published in The Lancet in October 2016, shows that Pre-school Autism Communication Therapy (PACT) aimed at helping parents communicate with their child reduces the severity of autism symptoms. Researchers found that children aged two to five years who had received a social-communication intervention (provided by SLTs) had less severe overall symptoms six years later, with improved social communication and reduced repetitive behaviours.

As part of PACT, SLTs work individually with parents using video, to help them adapt their interaction and communication specifically to match their child's level of social communication. SLTs also empower parents by sharing goal setting to extend shared attention and use communication and language enhancing strategies.

- ▶ For more information, email: info@rcslt.org

Shona's story: supporting adults with autism

Shona, an adult with autism, was keen to gain work experience but had difficulties interacting and communicating with others. During a work placement at a local florist she found interacting with customers challenging, and her responses were sometimes interpreted as rude and awkward by her work colleagues.

A local SLT and a workplace coordinator discussed these issues with Shona and her employer and, with Shona's permission, they worked together to raise Shona's colleagues' awareness of autism and to 'think differently' about her communication and interaction skills. As a result of this intervention, Shona's employer also offered her opportunities which played to her strengths (i.e. her excellent knowledge of plants and flowers) which was of benefit to them both.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

¹ RCSLT. (2009) Resource Manual for Commissioning and Planning Services for SLCN: Autism Spectrum Disorders. Available at: www.rcslt.org/speech_and_language_therapy/commissioning/asd_plus_intro

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ National Autistic Society. (2017) Communicating and interacting. Last visited 3 February 2017: www.autism.org.uk/about/communication/communicating.aspx

¹² National Autistic Society. (2017) Autism facts and history: how many people in the UK are autistic? Last visited 3 February 2017: <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/myths-facts-stats.aspx>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Taylor and Marrable. (2011) Access to social care for adults with autism spectrum conditions. Available at: www.researchgate.net/publication/275272988_Taylor_I_and_Marrable_T_2011_Access_to_social_care_for_adults_with_autistic_spectrum_conditions_SCIE