

Module 2 : Learning Disabilities Associated with Autism

- Problems associated with social skills and learning for young people on the autism spectrum
- The challenges of communication and learning for young people on the autism spectrum
- Difficulties with using imagination in learning for young people on the autism spectrum
- Other learning-related challenges for young people on the autism spectrum

In this module, we will further explore the common learning disabilities of many people on the autism spectrum.

This will include:

- Problems associated with social skills and learning
- The challenges of communication and learning
- Difficulties with using imagination in learning
- Other learning-related challenges for young people on the autism spectrum

2.1 Problems with Social Skills

People on the autism spectrum often have difficulty with social skills.

For young people, this can translate into a challenging school environment. Some children may be unaware of the social aspect, while others may be aware of the fact that they aren't fitting in with their peers.

Autistic people who find social skills challenging can find it hard to participate appropriately in class. They are often unable to follow directions and need to be given them in short, direct sentences. They may also speak out of turn, not understand when to stop speaking, or say things that are inappropriate for the classroom setting. This may be in part because they don't understand the social norms of a school situation but also because they're having trouble focusing and don't know what to do about it. It may also be attributed to anxiety.

A lack of social skills can sometimes make school feel like an unwelcoming place for young people on the autism spectrum.

They may be subject to teasing from those who are insensitive to their condition, or come across as aloof and indifferent to others who don't understand what being on the autism spectrum is like. As a result, autistic people may find it challenging to make friends.

On the other hand, some children on the autism spectrum are not interested in making friends. They may use breaks in the school day to read or engage in activities that are more appealing to them, preferring not to spend time with their peers. While it is helpful to understand and develop some social skills for later life, young people on the autism spectrum should also not feel forced into social situations when they may be more comfortable and perfectly happy participating in a solitary activity.

With the proper support and treatment, it is entirely possible to teach people on the autism spectrum to develop their social skills, but they will need to be broken down, explained in a literal and straightforward manner, and practised repeatedly. Done from early childhood, this might make secondary school and even university and the workforce more manageable for autistic people.

2.2 Problems with Communication

In addition to general social skills, autistic people may also have trouble with communication.

This can include understanding how other people communicate, as well as how they should communicate with others.

Young people who find communication in all its forms challenging will likely discover it affects their ability to learn. When understanding and processing verbal communication is a challenge, it can make participating in lessons or taking in new subject matter extremely difficult. Furthermore, the ability to understand and interpret non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions and gestures, can also have an added social component.

Some people on the autism spectrum may have what is known as echolalia; this is a condition that means they repeat words or phrases with little genuine understanding of their meaning.

Repetition may seem like a person is learning subject matter such as reading, spelling or arithmetic, but someone who is autistic may simply be echoing back the lesson without processing what it actually means. Reading comprehension, as a result, can be very difficult. They may also repeat words or phrases from favourite television shows; this can be known as "video talk".

When it comes to reading, writing and speaking, autistic people may also struggle with grammar and word meanings. As a result, their ability to communicate with others may be a real challenge. Going back to their potential social problems, this and echolalia may also contribute to an autistic person saying inappropriate words or phrases.

Some autistic people find communication challenging to the extent that they are unable to communicate verbally in an effective way. They may do far better communicating via sign language, through the use of reference objects, or with symbols and pictures.

Of course, on a very basic level, when autistic people struggle with communication, they will also

find it hard to ask questions or express their needs. In an educational setting, this can make it challenging to ask for clarification about an assignment or state that they're having difficulty. Young people on the autism spectrum may benefit from having extra supports in place to enhance and assist with their learning, so it's approached in a way that's best suited to their unique needs and condition.

2.3 Problems with Imagination

People on the autism spectrum tend to have a very limited range of imagination and will find participating in imaginative activities difficult.

This can cause a delay in the development of their interpersonal play skills. Autistic children may simply copy and repeat the actions of other children in a play setting, without understanding what the game is. As mentioned in the last module, they may also play alongside other children instead of actually engaging with them.

In the classroom, this can make learning difficult. Many school lessons require the use of imagination, such as art and writing. Even reading or being read to may be challenging, not just because of trouble with language and comprehension, but because picturing what's happening in a story may be difficult.

It is very difficult for autistic people to see the "big picture". They tend to get lost in minute details rather than pulling information together from a variety of sources in order to see a situation as a whole. This can result in challenges with researching, studying and forming opinions.

The exception, to an extent, is a subject that someone on the autism spectrum has a special interest in. While they still may not see the big picture of how their favoured subject affects other people or society in daily life, they may be passionate and hyper-focused on studying it and become an expert in that one field.

With the right support in place, encouraging a special interest can potentially result in a career for a young person once they complete school.

Problems with imagination also mean that people on the autism spectrum have difficulty knowing how to set goals, plan, conduct self-monitoring and manage their time effectively. Getting caught up in the details can easily result in not making typical educational accomplishments or even completing assignments.

Whether or not a person can be taught to have an imagination is another debate, but with the right methods and support in place, people on the autism spectrum can learn how to manage time and make achievements in their learning.

2.4 Other Learning Related Issues

While we have touched on the learning disabilities that can affect autistic people, especially when it comes to socialising, communication and imagination, there are also other aspects to keep in mind for learning.

Autistic people often have difficulty with fine motor skills, which can make everything from writing to turning the pages of a book challenging. While these can be worked on with an occupational therapist, in an educational setting, some autistic people may find it easier to use computers and other aids that accommodate their motor skill issues.

Stress and anxiety can also have a profound effect on the ability of an autistic person to learn.

When something as routine as a timetable change or a substitute teacher can be unsettling for an autistic child who thrives on routine and rigidity, managing in a learning environment can become even more difficult for those who have anxiety as well as being on the autism spectrum.

Partnered with difficulties socialising and communicating, anxiety can also make it even more challenging for autistic children to understand a teacher's expectations of them, or to express their own needs.

The ability to pay attention can also have a profound effect on the ability of young autistic people to learn. In some cases, people will have both an autism spectrum disorder and Attention Deficit

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This means that not only is understanding and comprehending a lesson challenging, but even sitting still and attempting to focus is also challenging.

Children on the autism spectrum can often be mistaken for having ADHD or a learning disability, when in fact that might not be the case. It's important that children showing such symptoms are given the attention they require, as treating a child who has ADHD will be different to someone who is autistic.

To summarise the learning implications for young people on the autism spectrum, it is important to remember that they will do so at a different pace to other children. They may meet certain educational milestones later in life, or make certain accomplishments in different ways to other children (such as communicating through sign language or the use of symbols.) Whilst some, for example, may never learn to have functional speech, it may be discovered that they have other abilities.

It is also important to remember that children on the autism spectrum may have different learning styles. What works for other children in the classroom may just not work for them, but they may have some academic achievements when learning the same subject matter as other pupils, and this learning could be approached in a way that's better suited to their needs.

Take a Quick Recap Test

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2.5 What We've Learned

In Module 2, we delved more in depth with certain aspects of autism.

We looked at the problems young people can experience in a learning environment when they are on the autism spectrum. These are primarily learning disabilities that can affect their social and communication skills and ability to use imagination and comprehend subject matter.

Some autistic children may have trouble fitting in with their peers or experience stress and anxiety, which can affect their ability to learn.

Summary

After completing this module, you should have a more in depth understanding of autism.

You should have a broader understanding of the learning difficulties that people on the autism spectrum experience, and how difficulty with social skills, communication skills, and the ability to use imagination can make learning more of a challenge for autistic children.

In the next module, we will look at the main causes of autism spectrum disorders, including myths about autism that have now been disproven. We will also look at how autism is diagnosed in adults and children, and examine how autism can be a different experience for males than it is for females.

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