



Aspie Trainers

Communication on the Autistic Spectrum

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Who are Aspie Trainers and what do we do?

Autism Training Project

- Operating since 2014
- 11 **#ActuallyAutistic** Trainers
- Supported by Impact Advocacy Service

Trainers are supported

- To develop their skills and confidence.
- To deliver training sessions from a neurodiverse perspective – we train parents, carers, people who work with autistic individuals and commercial businesses.

Our Aims

- To help the autistic community by delivering training which will improve services offered to autistic people.
- To provide our trainers with paid work and empower them to seek further paid employment.

Different people refer to Autism in different ways:

Asperger's

Autism

**Autistic
Spectrum
Disorder (ASD)**

**Autistic Spectrum
Condition (ASC)**

- Aspie Trainers tend to use ASC, Autism or Asperger's interchangeably
- Many of our trainers were diagnosed with Asperger's prior to changes in the diagnostic criteria, but recognise that increasingly fewer diagnosis are made using this term
- 'Condition' is felt to be more positive in the autism self advocacy community (as it implies difference rather than something being 'wrong')
- **Neurotypical / NT** – means someone of the majority neurotype
- **Neurodiversity / ND** refers to a concept where neurological differences such as Autism, ADHD and Dyslexia, are recognised and respected as any other human variation.

Objectives

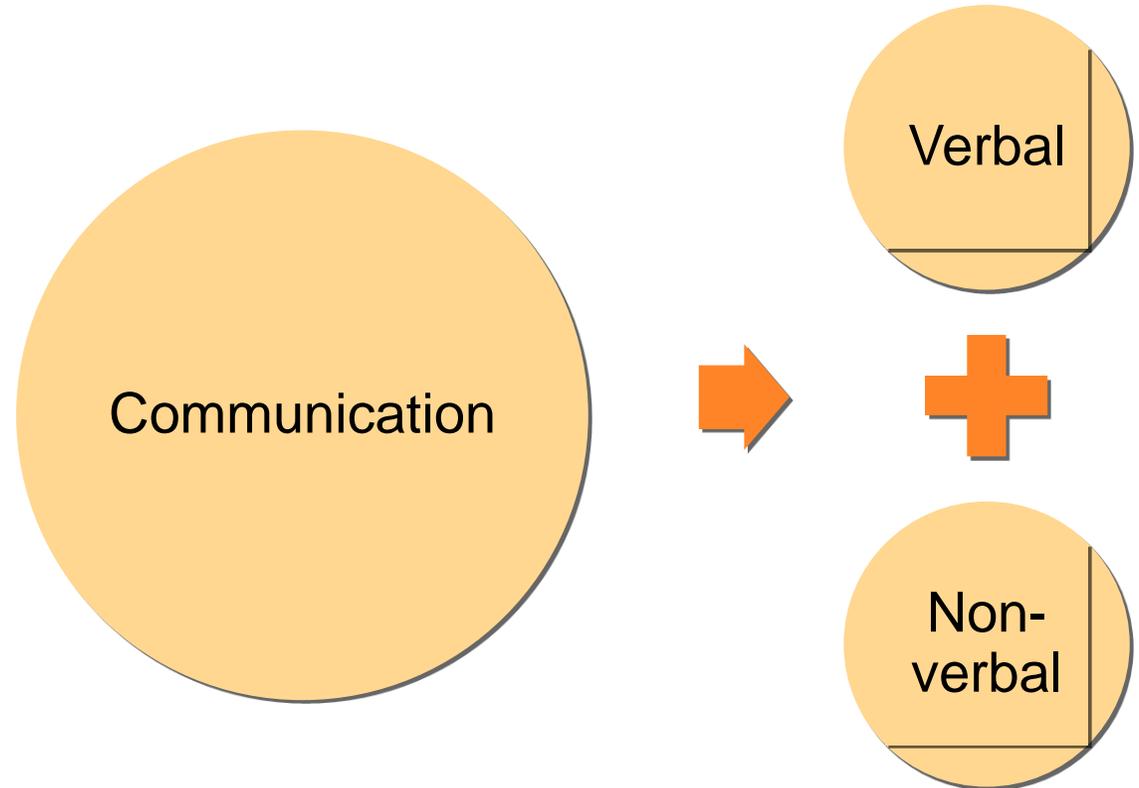
- Describe the common difficulties which autistic people experience with communication
- Explain the impact that difficulties with communication can have on the lives of autistic people in different settings such as the home, school/college and in adult life
- Explore ways to support autistic people to manage their difficulties with communication in a positive way



What is Communication?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary:

“The imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium”



What is verbal communication

- Verbal communication is the use of sounds and words to express yourself.
- Words represent just **7%** of human communication related to feelings and attitudes, tone of voice accounts for **38%**, and the remaining **55%** comes from nonverbal sources, such as body language and facial expressions.

Aspects of verbal communication which cause particular difficulties for autistic people:

- Figurative language
- Ambiguous or idiosyncratic language
- Idioms



Problems with verbal communication:

Literal interpretation of language

This leads to difficulties with:

- Sarcasm (and irony)
- Jokes (or dry humour)
- Figurative language
 - “Has that gone over your head?”



Problems with verbal communication:

Ambiguous or idiosyncratic language and jargon

- For example
 - “I’ll call you around 2”
 - “See you later”
 - “Give me a moment”

This can add to the uncertainty of a situation, especially when meeting new people or in new situations where others’ agendas and intentions are not known

HI & LOIS



Verbal communication

Figurative Language...

- Read the following 'everyday' idioms and their meanings
- Are you familiar with them all?
- Think about how an Autistic person may interpret these sayings.
- How do you think these misunderstandings make the Autistic person feel?

Pause the webinar for 2 minutes to have a think through these phrases

Idioms:

- Miss the boat
- Out of the blue
- Jumping the shark
- Busman's holiday
- Cakewalk
- Hold your horses

Answers

➤ **Miss the boat...**

- To miss your chance
- But where is this boat? Why do I want to get on a boat in the first place? What has a boat got to do with this meeting?

➤ **Out of the blue...**

- Suddenly
- What blue? I do/don't like blue things...

➤ **Jumping the shark...**

- The point where something becomes ridiculous (particularly in TV)
- What shark? Why not just say 'ridiculous'?

Answers

➤ **Busman's holiday...**

- Someone doing something in their spare time that they also do for work
- Who is a busman? I'm not going on holiday / If my supporter is going on holiday who will help me?

➤ **Cakewalk...**

- An easy task
- Distracted thinking about cakes now.../ walking balancing a cake is hard /

➤ **Hold your horses...**

- Wait
- I don't have horses / I'm in a rush, why are you distracting me with this metaphor?

Idioms and figurative language

Neurotypical adults usually take idioms and figurative language for granted

- Even if an unusual phrase is encountered the meaning can be worked out from context, or the phrase can be ignored

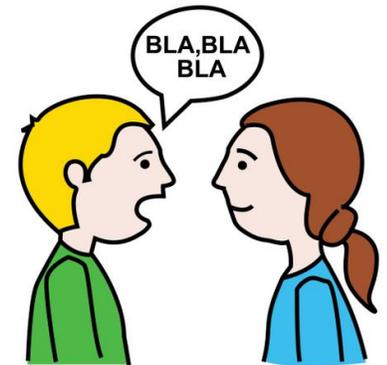
For autistic people idioms and figurative language...

-can cause confusion or distraction in the moment
-can make it harder to retain important details
- ... can add to the stress felt throughout the day and build towards meltdowns or shutdowns



Alternatives to Verbal Communication

- Speaking is just ONE form of communication.
- Historically, delayed language has been used to differentiate between Aspergers and Autism.
- Non verbal Autistic individuals are assumed to be 'low functioning' and intellectually disabled.
- Yet many of them have average or above average intelligence and excellent comprehension...they just need help to access alternative means of communication.
- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) can include gestures, signing, symbols, visual art, word boards, communication boards and books, as well as sophisticated technology solutions (e.g. texting).



What are the Alternatives?

No Tech	Low Tech	High Tech
<p>No extra equipment – sometimes called “unaided communication”</p> <p>e.g. body language, gestures, pointing, eye pointing, facial expressions, vocalisations and signing.</p>	<p>Systems which do not need power to function. Sometimes called “aided communication” because they use basic equipment</p> <p>e.g. pen and paper to write or draw; alphabet and word boards; communication charts or books with pictures, photos and symbols; particular objects that represent what someone needs to understand or say.</p>	<p>Systems which use batteries or mains power.</p> <p>e.g. Most gadgets or software speak and/or produce text such as mobile devices, tablets and laptops. These may have simple buttons or pages that speak when touched. Very sophisticated systems use equipment specially designed to support communication.</p>

Why is this Important?

Meet Ido Kedar:

A non-verbal autistic person and a published author who hopes his work will help other autistic people find their way out of silence.



“Not only was my mind fully present and understanding everything, but I read fluently. I thought of retorts, jokes and comments all day long in my head. Only no one else knew. So, I was talked to like a toddler, not given a real education, and kept bored and sad.”

A personal example

Why is this Important?

- People who can speak aloud and have reasonable control over their motor processing are often called “[high-functioning](#),” and ‘mildly Autistic’.
- Yet these individuals often struggle with employment, relationships, and executive function as well as mental health issues. Their needs are wrongly downplayed due to the fact they can talk.
- Those that cannot speak and may not appear to understand what goes on around them are often described as “severely autistic” particularly where they are disabled by neuromotor difficulties.
- This assumption *dehumanizes* people like **Ido Kedar** and **my sister**. It is this assumption that leads to them and many like them being treated as unthinking, unfeeling, and unhearing.

How can this help us?

- Don't make assumptions about Autistic people based on their outward behaviour,
- Don't assume that a non-speaking autistic who doesn't react to your presence in the room is unaware of the conversation.
- Don't assume that someone is not really autistic just because they make eye contact with you and can chat about the weather.
- Don't assume that a fluently-talkative autistic person is capable of processing what you have just said to them.
- Do bear in mind that latest research shows Autistic people's communication is not flawed, just different
- **DO take your time to learn and to understand their strengths and limitations so you can communicate effectively.**

Emotional regulation in Autism

- May struggle to label and describe what we are feeling – making it difficult to express needs
- Rigid thinking: lack of flexibility can cause conflict and breakdown in communication
- Lower inhibition: may overshare
- Some Autistic people are great at seeing patterns in information and identifying solutions to problems. But some of us struggle to see the big picture or grasp concepts
- A difficulty reading social and emotional cues
- **Being hyper or hypo sensitive to different sensory input can be a huge barrier to communication**
- The way our brains are wired means we are genetically predisposed to having difficulty with emotional regulation.

Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication consists of the parts of communication which do not include words. For example:

- Para-language (how words are spoken)
- Body language & posture
- Eye contact



Autistic people can find it hard to read body language in others or use it to express themselves.

Para-Language

The way in which words are spoken

Intonation

Pitch

Speed

Volume

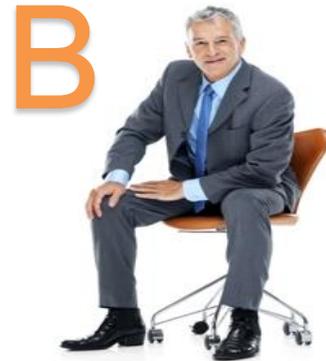
Pauses & hesitation

I didn't say she stole my money
I *didn't* say she stole my money
I didn't *say* she stole my money
I didn't say *she* stole my money
I didn't say she *stole* my money
I didn't say she stole *my* money
I didn't say she stole my *money*

Disclaimer: James S still does not understand this!

Body language and posture

Task: Look at each of these images:



- Pause the session for 2 minutes to look at these images
- What do you think could be being expressed by the body language?
- When might someone expect to see these kinds of expressions?
- Why do you think this?



Is this person angry? Or perhaps bored?

Why do we think this?



Do we trust this person?
Are they friendly or sleazy?

Why do we think this?

C



What is happening in this picture?
How do these two feel about each other? Does one have more power?

Why do we think this?

D



What is happening in this picture?
How do these two feel about each other? Does one have more power?

Why do we think this?

Body language and posture

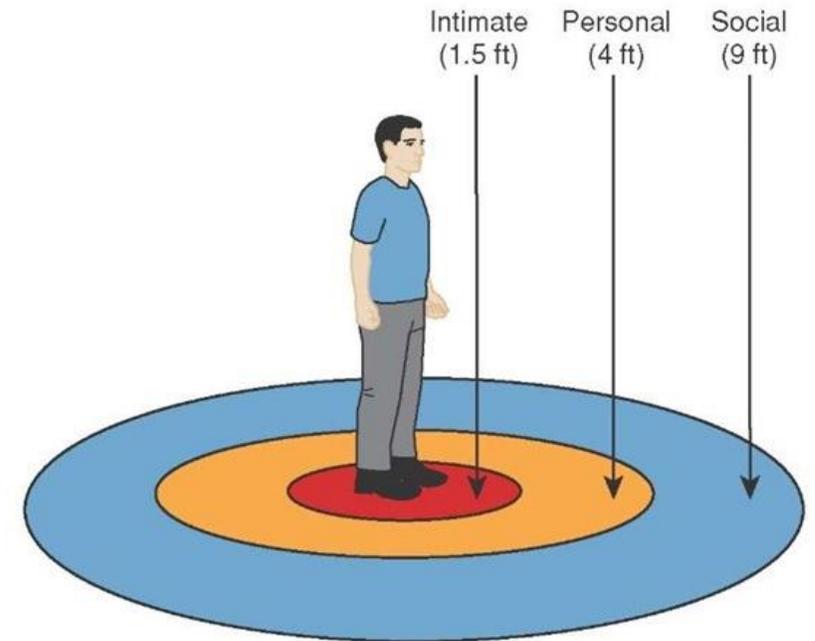


- Over time neurotypical people become used to reading key signs in body language.
- Along with verbal cues, it helps to indicate whether someone is happy, sad, aggressive, trustworthy or possibly dishonest
- Autistic people struggle much more to interpret meaning behind body language and so may not be able to draw on these additional clues

Personal space

People on the autistic spectrum frequently have issues with personal space

- Lack of awareness of other people's personal space
- Being given too little
- Being given too much



Eye Contact

- Some autistic people don't like eye contact
- It can feel uncomfortable and itchy
- Brain trying to process too much information
- Lose focus on what is being said
- Eyes may 'flit' around the room
- **Don't force eye contact**
- **Don't misinterpret eye contact or a lack of it – just because we're not looking at you doesn't mean we're not paying attention**



Written information

Problems with receiving written information:

- Too much information – can lead to overload
- Too little information – can lead to confusion
- Fewer clues to the meaning of language – therefore ambiguous language, sarcasm, metaphor and jargon are even more difficult to navigate.



Written information

Problems with giving written information

- Mind going quicker than your hand
- Not being able to put thoughts into words
- Concern about words being misinterpreted
- Difficulty if the 'audience' or receiver is not known, or if it may be read by multiple people

Communication: exams / school work

“Let’s find the paints” said JJ

“Can we paint the shed wall?” I asked

“Yes” said JJ. “It really is a boring colour”

JJ fetched the steps. He said “These steps area bit wobbly. I will paint the top bit.

He climbed up and painted a basketball net and a red ball going in to it. I painted some beautiful flowers and some grass.

Why did JJ agree to paint the shed wall?

Key stage 1 English reading paper, 2019

Difficulties with test questions:

- Too much information or too many questions
- Ambiguous questions
- Needing to know ‘how to answer’

*Conservatives are pragmatic rather than ideological.
Discuss*

Total for question 7 = 45

A level Politics paper, 2018

Communication tips

Tips: verbal communication

Keep your language clear and concise

Avoid ambiguity, be specific

Talk to your young person about how they prefer to be communicated to

Don't talk down to people, difficulty with understanding is not the same as a *lack* of understanding

Be prepared for emotional regulation challenges

Tips: verbal communication

Try not to use humour until you get to know the person well.

Check whether what you have said has been understood – by asking if it has been understood!

Remember paralanguage and the difficulties which this can cause for someone with ASC

Tips: verbal communication

Remember:

It can be difficult to put this advice into action during the 'natural' flow of a conversation.

Don't be afraid to pause to give yourself time to think about your phrasing.

If you are pausing – explain to the autistic person that you are pausing to think of how best to phrase something clearly

Emotional regulation in Autism

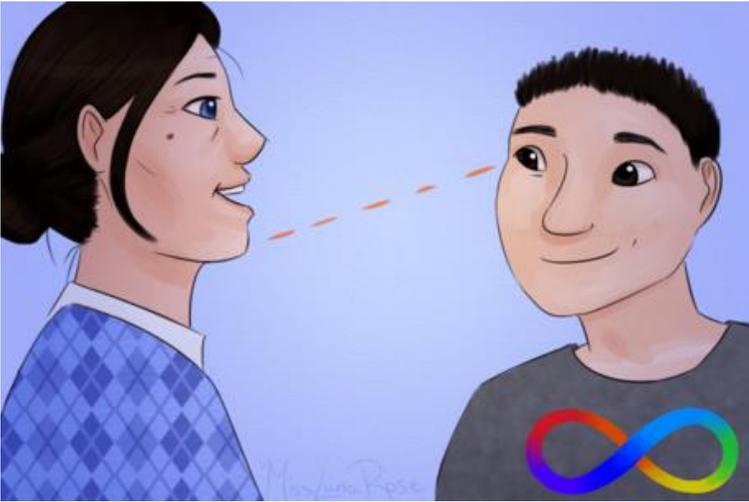
- Resources such as ‘emotion cards’ can help to teach basic emotions
- Social stories or books exploring emotions
- Use of stimulating enabling objects (fidget spinners / soft or sensory toys)
- ‘Label’ emotions in natural contexts – e.g. when reading a book / watching a video you might point out emotions
- Many autistic people feel emotions of others very intensely but aren’t able to identify what to do about them – talking through situations in stories or videos may help (e.g. “Look, Abed is sad, what is Annie doing to help him feel happier?”)
- Talking about your own reactions and feelings with older children/teenagers (when I got a bad grade / argued with a friend I felt x, but doing y helped)

Tips: non-verbal communication

- Be aware of your own body language, movements and posture
- If you want to express something, try to say it (clearly) verbally, rather than relying on physical expressions
- Personal space – make sure that both you and the autistic person you are speaking to have a comfortable amount of space.



Tips: non-verbal communication



- Knowing the right body language to use or appropriate personal space to allow is difficult for autistic people – it may be necessary to explain that their use of body language is inappropriate but this should be done sensitively
- Make allowances for the fact that autistic people find eye contact problematic
 - Don't enforce it
 - Don't prejudge the lack of it

Tips: written communication

Written communication may not work for all autistic people, always ask the individual how they prefer to be communicated with.

Where written communication is okay, make yours clear, concise and to the point. Use pictures/ visual aids where appropriate.

Be prepared to explain yourself and answer questions, even if you think that you have been clear.

Tips: written communication

Be aware of how literal some autistic people can be – they rely on the words to hear your message, so avoid sarcasm and idioms.

An autistic person may require support to understand the meaning of homework/exam questions i.e. what is being asked and how to answer

Tips: school work / exams

- Keep an open dialogue with the school and particularly the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)
- Talk to your young person about what they find helpful and what they find difficult in terms of handouts and instructions – make sure that this is fed back to their teachers and SENCO, it could be made part of their support plan
- Provide support understanding homework tasks and deadlines for completion
- Provide support with learning to interpret exam questions – in older years each subject usually has guidance on how to interpret ambiguous questions and how to best to structure answers. Teachers should give guides to this as part of standard revision

Communication in different settings: home

- Preserve Home as a safe space.
- Agree any 'house rules' together and display them .
- Encourage and respect quiet, private time to minimise and/or recover from meltdowns.
- Suggest journaling as a way to process feelings they cant talk about.

Communication in different settings: school

- Advocate for Autistic young people to ensure teaching staff understand their needs.
- Friendships and romance are tricky when you don't grasp the unwritten social rules.
- Ambiguous, open ended exam questions are difficult to interpret. Practice using past papers.

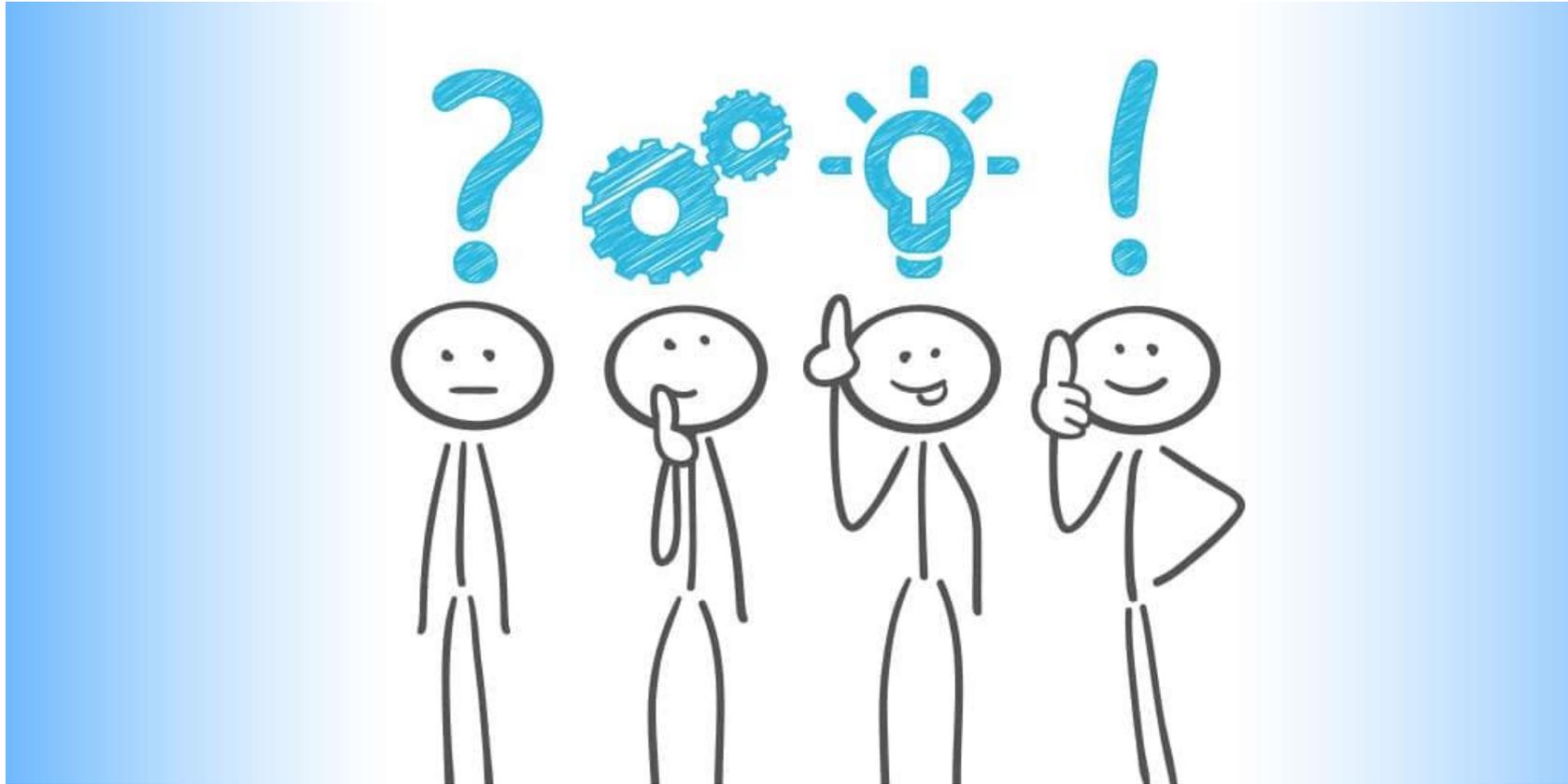
Communication in different settings: adult life (1)

- Interview processes and assessment centres are rarely Autism friendly. Finding and keeping a job can be tricky.
- Reasonable adjustments can be requested, but many do not want to disclose their neurodiversity.
- Friendships and romance can be tricky if other people involved are not supportive or understanding of Autism.
- Autistic people may be judged for not behaving and responding according to neurotypical expectation.
- Risk of social isolation if an Autistic person does not feel accepted.

Communication in different settings: adult life (2)

- The better understanding that an autistic person is able to develop of themselves and their autism, the more likely that they will be able to advocate for themselves and their needs personally and professionally – support your young person to develop this understanding through research & discussion
- Many autistic people find it helpful to be linked in with either or both a local or online autistic community for support, guidance, understanding and friendship
- Around times of transition from childhood to adulthood support your young person to understand their rights and what services and support are available to them

Question time:



Question time:

“What can help an autistic person who struggles to communicate pain or discomfort?”

Question time:

“Who can help an autistic young person to develop at answering exam questions?”

Question time:

“How can I help my young person to manage being around others?”

Question time:

“If my autistic young person texts a friend and they don’t reply straight away they get very frustrated and will call them over and over. How can I support my autistic young person to take part in this kind of social interaction?”

Question time:

“Do you (or other autistic people) struggle when people are overly expressive with their body language?”

Question time:

“If an autistic person becomes distressed by a miscommunication during a meeting do you have any advice on how this could be resolved to continue the meeting?”

Question time:

“I work with a group of autistic people, what advice do you have to support good communication between the group?”

Feedback



Please use the link in the video description to access downloadable slides and complete the digital feedback survey.

Your feedback will help us shape future training.



Thank You!

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