

Children with autistic spectrum disorders

Also known as autism, autism spectrum disorder or autism spectrum condition

General information

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) struggle with aspects of communication and interaction as well as their imaginative thinking. Children often have language needs, though this varies greatly between individuals. Some children may have high functioning autism and they may have good language with some specific areas of difficulty. Difficulties may or may not include phonic skills.

Helping to access the phonics screening check

Possible issues	Ways to help
Children may lose attention	Children with autistic spectrum disorders will benefit from undertaking the check in a room with low levels of auditory and visual distractions and from breaks
They will also need pre-preparing for the check	For example, use a visual timetable
Processing may be difficult	It may be necessary for children to be given extended time to respond
Children may be anxious about a check or new activity	If possible make the check appear like a routine activity, for example administering it when the child is usually withdrawn for one to one support

The outcome of the check

Some children with ASD will not reliably demonstrate their phonic skills in this procedure due to issues with any of the following:

- Participating in an unfamiliar task format
- Understanding what's required in this check
- Focusing attention and maintaining focus of attention for the duration of the check
- Behaviour and participation issues, which may include the child following their own preferred activities related to motivational and sensory issues
- Difficulties with auditory processing and auditory memory. Children may also have co-occurring learning disabilities or dyspraxia

Some children will show exceptional phonic skills and awareness for their age; these children may be hyperlexic, showing good decoding skills but very limited comprehension of reading.

Some children with ASD will show expected phonic skills for their age whilst others, with language impairments impacting on phonic skills, may lack basic phonic skills to attempt the check. These children may employ strategies to avoid the tasks presented, or give unrelated responses, or no response at all.

Staff who know the child well will be able to comment on the extent to which they have engaged with the check format and on the likelihood of gaining an accurate measure of phonic skills from this check.

Check results should be compared with phonic skills demonstrated in activities that are familiar to the child and observed use of phonic strategies when reading and in other tasks.

The child's comprehension of reading should be checked frequently.

Responding to the outcome of the check

Teachers will need to take into consideration the child's strengths and needs to optimise their access to learning.

Children with ASD should have access to phonics using a multi-sensory approach through auditory, visual and tactile teaching rather than just relying upon auditory processing skills or their writing. Some will require an individually tailored approach that takes into account their individual profile of skills and difficulties. Some will use alternative strategies for reading, such as whole word recognition, or reading using symbols as well as, or instead of, written words.

Key considerations include:

- Use of multisensory strategies using visual and kinaesthetic strategies as well as auditory strategies
- Use of symbols and/or whole word recognition to support skills at decoding text for pupils who have specific difficulties with phonic decoding
- Building motivation to engage in reading and phonics tasks through formats and routines that are engaging for the individual and play to their profile of strengths

Reading comprehension must be considered in children with ASD, as it may be well below decoding ability and will have long-term negative effects on academic achievement if not supported. If children with ASD have good decoding skills their difficulties with comprehension may be hidden and overlooked in the early stages of literacy acquisition. In addition to exposing them to story books they will need interventions that targets the following to develop reading comprehension:

- ✓ Conversation skills
- ✓ Narrative skills
- ✓ Social inference
- ✓ Social adaptation

Additional resources and further support

Publications and resources:

Read, Write, Inc – www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com

Nuffield Centre Dyspraxia Programme - www.ndp3.org

ACE Centre North: An introduction to symbols and also provides information on a wide range of low and high-tech communication aids - www.ace-north.org.uk

Social Stories, a range of Carol Gray books - www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories/how-to-write-social-stories

TEACCH – www.autismuk.com

National Autistic Society – Social stories and comic strip conversations, visual supports

Information sheets on visual supports and social stories and comic strip conversations - www.autism.org.uk

Communicate In Print 2: Create symbol resources - www.widget.com

Organisations and websites:

National Autistic Society – www.autism.org.uk

Case Study

Jack uses some common words and social phrases to communicate. He responds well to visual systems such as symbols and signing. When given too much verbal information, he 'shuts down' or screeches.

Jack performs well in familiar, highly structured situations and attends to familiar activities for up to 10 minutes. He is resistant to change, often displays distress at times of transition, and opts out of new experiences.

In the check, Jack is unwilling to engage in the unfamiliar format and situation. Jack's teachers decide to look at alternative ways of gaining a clear view of Jack's decoding skills within his usual routine and activities.

What helps Jack

Jack uses Read, Write Inc on a daily basis and has this displayed on his visual timetable; this is on his timetable Monday-Friday at the same time, giving him consistency. Sounds are produced on the smartboard using a voice-activated system; all teachers in the school who are trained in RWI are using the same consistent sounds and vocabulary. There are many opportunities to practice and repeat sounds with lots of praise given. Sounds are taught visually through the smartboard as well as using a hands-on approach using finger puppets. Symbol cards (including Lipsync, which shows the change in mouth position), posting games, and mirror work including a range of oral activities are used to encompass Jack's need for a multi-sensory approach. Social stories can be used to explain the nature of the session and a talking mats approach can be used to categorise under the headings of voiced/voiceless, etc.

Staff who carry out this activity with Jack report that he has a good knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, but is unable to produce certain speech sounds. He's able to decode some CVC words but doesn't do so consistently.