

The Garth School – Autism Policy

THE NATURE OF AUTISM

Autism is a lifelong condition, which has its origins before birth. It is a very complex condition which presents very differently from person to person.

Currently Autism is diagnosed behaviourally. This means that the medical professionals involved in the diagnosis will base their judgement on clinical interviews with parents and carers and/or direct observation of the child. Autism is usually diagnosed by a paediatrician, often working with a speech and language therapist and a psychologist as part of a multi-disciplinary team. As yet there is no test to identify Autism through biological markers, such as gene variants or specific proteins in the blood.

Autism is diagnosed when atypical patterns of behaviour are observed in three key areas of development:

ONE

Social understanding, social interaction and relating to others

People with Autism may from infancy appear quite disinterested in others. They may appear lost in their own world and not make eye contact with others. As a consequence, they may not develop the skills of joint attention and reciprocal interaction that are so important in typical child development. As they grow older, children and young people with Autism often struggle to understand the motivations of others and the social rules that organise society. Sometimes, people with Autism are described as lacking 'theory of mind': the ability to put themselves into the position of others and understand their perspective. People with Autism may struggle to pick up the subtle social cues that help us to manage relationships, such as noticing when someone is embarrassed, trying to redirect a conversation onto a new topic or end a conversation politely.

TWO

Communication, both verbal and non-verbal

Many children with Autism are late to speak or may not develop spoken language at all. In some cases where language develops later, this may be linked to the lack of reciprocal interaction with primary care givers that is so important in the development of language for

most children. When language comprehension does develop, it is often unusually hard for children with Autism to understand non-literal forms of language, such as idioms and other figures of speech. Many people with Autism find themselves more adept at processing visual information than auditory information. Systems such as Makaton and symbol usage, which support communication through visual cues, are therefore very helpful to people with Autism.

THREE

Flexibility of thinking

Children with Autism often display strong interests in particular toys and spend long periods of time in repetitive play structures. For example, lining up sets of toy cars over and over again or repeatedly spinning the blades of a circular fan. Children and young people with Autism may be very resistant to having these play sequences interrupted, perhaps because they provide order and predictability in an uncertain world. A lack of flexible thinking skills means that it is usually easiest for children with Autism to manage their interactions with the world when events follow predictable routines and structures; unexpected changes may be very hard to understand and lead to emotional and behavioural upset. It is common for people with Autism to require longer to process information, particularly if this involves change from familiar routines or the information is delivered by auditory means.

+ PLUS

Sensory Sensitivities

Many people with Autism have difficulties in a fourth area: sensory sensitivity. They may be unusually sensitive to the way things feel, for example, finding the texture of certain clothing materials intolerable to the point of painfulness. Unusual levels of sensitivity to sounds, smells and visual stimuli are the daily experience of people with Autism. They may be hypersensitive and experience aspects of the daily sensory diet that we all live through as overwhelming. They may simultaneously be hyposensitive to other stimuli and not notice things that seem very apparent to most neurotypical people. ('Neurotypicals' is the term used by many people with Autism to describe those who do not have a diagnosis of the condition). Each person with Autism has their own sensory profile and what may overwhelm one person may have no adverse impact on another.

When I was little, loud noises were also a problem, often feeling like a dentist's drill hitting a nerve. They actually caused pain. I was scared to death of balloons popping, because the sound was like an explosion in my ear. Minor noises that most people can tune out drove me to distraction. (Grandin, 2006, p63)

THE NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY

SPELL

FRAMEWORK

The approaches used at The Garth School School draw on the understanding of Autism described above. We also subscribe to the National Autistic Society (NAS) SPELL framework, which is designed to provide a mnemonic of five key areas of support that evidence shows are effective in scaffolding support for learning for children and young people with Autism.

SPELL is an acronym for:

S

Structure:

Structure is fundamental in supporting our students with Autism to make sense of what can be a very confusing and potentially overwhelming world. Structure takes many different forms, including consistency of staffing, predictability of routines, a physical environment that can be relied upon not change unexpectedly and adapted teaching techniques that pay attention to individual learning styles.

P

Positive attitudes and expectations:

At The Garth School we have robust systems for monitoring the progress of our students in their academic and social development. We have high expectations of all of our students based on their current functioning and rates of progress in the past. We are a learning environment that continually evaluates new methodologies and implements those where we are able to evidence benefits for our students.

E

Empathy:

Through careful observation of our young people, respectful discussions about them and liaison with parents and carers we seek to understand the experience of our students better and adapt ourselves to meet their needs.

L

Low arousal:

At The Garth School we are fortunate in having a pool, sensory room and soft play room in which we can provide our students with an environment that matches their sensory needs. We understand that for many young people with Autism this means a lower stimulation environment than is ideal for other learners. This can be particularly difficult to achieve when some children with complex learning needs require a very high stimulation environment to maximise their learning and consequently careful classroom design is required.

L

Links:

We value enormously our links with parents, recognising that close communication is vital in ensuring consistency of approach for and understanding the daily experience of a young person who may not be able to communicate verbally. We are fortunate at The Garth School in having very close relationships with health, social care and education support professionals. We try to make best use of these professionals in problem solving around individual pupil programmes as well as supporting the professional development of our staff.

HOME / SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

At The Garth School we regard a close working relationship between home and school as vital for all of our students. For our students who have communication difficulties, including our young people with Autism, this is particularly important. Our role is more than simply the delivery of a curriculum but as partners in the overall development of each child. We anticipate that each teacher will take personal responsibility for:

- ❖ Ensuring that open daily communication is maintained with parents through the home / school book.
- ❖ Being sensitive to personal communication preferences of individual parents and accommodating these wherever possible.
- ❖ Fully consulting parents in relation to programme planning for their child both through formal and informal meetings such as annual reviews, multi-disciplinary meetings and parents' evenings.

Many children with Autism experience difficulties that impact at home and school, for example with diet, toileting, sleeping and sensory sensitivities. Parents are welcome to contact the school to discuss these issues and seek support and where possible we will to work jointly with them. The first point of contact for a parent should be the class teacher. Many issues can be dealt with at this level but class teachers should involve a senior manager in more complex issues such as those which may require home visits or a referral to an external professional, such as a health or social care worker.

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

It is in the design of the classroom that the subtleties of producing an environment that suits the varying needs of The Garth School students and the ingenuity of the good teacher are revealed. For example, the needs of the child with Autism for a low stimulation environment may be quite different from the requirements of a child with PMLD. Similarly, each class grouping will contain a unique mix of students and so a formulaic classroom design will rarely be suitable. At The Garth School the teacher is expected to consider the space available and the needs of the students in the class to design the best possible learning environment in what are in most cases rather smaller than optimum classrooms.

Factors which need to be taken into consideration include:

- ❖ individual workstations
- ❖ paired and group work
- ❖ 1 – 1 programmes
- ❖ whole group and social activities
- ❖ quiet zone for withdrawal
- ❖ tray stacks for children who may require this level of formality
- ❖ resources are accessible and are clearly labelled using photographs
- ❖ resources are returned to their storage location at the end of a teaching session.
- ❖ surfaces are kept reasonably tidy and free from clutter
- ❖ schedules and timetables are easily accessible for reference
- ❖ once set up reorganisation of the room is kept to a minimum
- ❖ personal areas for the storage of coats, bags and equipment

In promoting the independence of students with AUTISM it is important to encourage them to take control of their own learning requirements wherever possible. This is more easily

achieved in the context of a well-organised classroom where resources are located in a predictable and labelled location.

Classroom displays:

- ❖ relevant to current learning topics
- ❖ structured according to the needs of the students
- ❖ located to allow for low stimulation areas for children who are
- ❖ sensitive to excessive visual stimulation

In designing classroom displays the teacher may be forced to make compromises between some students whose attention is maximised by a highly visually stimulating display and others for whom the same display may be overwhelming and thereby inaccessible.

Sensory needs:

- ❖ light levels (including maintenance of bulbs to avoid flickering)
- ❖ noise levels and systems to manage this for sensitive students
- ❖ materials chosen taking into account tactile defensiveness
- ❖ students who may be sensitive to 'unplanned touch' enabled to avoid this

TEACHING and LEARNING

The normal intuitions of the good teacher will mislead when applied to Autism. Teachers need to take a different approach to the process of teaching and learning to accommodate the particular style of autistic learners and they need to possess a specific kind of knowledge.

(Jordan, R. and Powell, S., 1995)

In these two sentences the challenge to the teacher of children with Autism is set. Many good teachers base their personal pedagogy around the quality of their interpersonal interaction, the motivational nature of their delivery and the richness of the resources they deploy to interest and engage students. These techniques will not necessarily mesh with the core difficulties of students with Autism. Interpersonal skills may not be helpful in engaging a young person with social communication difficulties. A motivational style of oral delivery will be unlikely to improve access for a child with a communication disorder. A rich multi-sensory array of resources may overwhelm someone with difficulties in flexible thinking and areas of sensory defensiveness. Rather, the teacher of students with Autism needs to bring to bear their knowledge of Autism and knowledge of the learning profile of the particular student on their broader knowledge of what characterises good teaching and learning. Autism specific structured teaching approaches drawing on the TEACCH methodology are used at the Garth School for some students who require this level of structure.

Commonly, students with Autism demonstrate the following characteristic learning and thinking styles:

- ❖ a relative strength in concrete thinking, for example, labelling shapes rather than describing their characteristics
- ❖ a preference for visually as opposed to orally presented materials, for example, written arithmetic rather than orally presented tasks
- ❖ a relatively slow speed of processing of orally presented materials leading to partial or incomplete understanding of a spoken instruction
- ❖ a relative strength in rote memory, for example, often displaying stronger reading skills through whole word learning than through phonics
- ❖ a strength in understanding visuospatial relationships, for example, puzzles.
- ❖ difficulties in abstract thinking, for example, inferring what a house in a tropical country might be like from knowledge of the climate
- ❖ difficulties in social cognition, for example, understanding what another person might think in a given situation
- ❖ difficulties in communication. Many people with Autism are reluctant writers; some AUTISM adults describe struggling to understand why they were expected to write down something they already knew
- ❖ unusual patterns of attention, for example, total absorption in a favourite activity and fleeting attention to something that is not preferred. The attentional pattern of a person with Autism has been described as being like a spotlight, focussed tightly on one particular area, as contrasted with the ambient lighting of a neurotypical attention pattern.

Some implications of these characteristics for the teacher's practice are listed in the table below

<p>PLANNING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Anticipate needing to make use of visual aids in the delivery of any taught component. ❖ Plan for visual scaffolding around tasks to aid comprehension of what is expected, for example, using sorting, matching and other categorisation tasks. ❖ Setting appropriately challenging targets for learning. ❖ Provide instructions in a clear step by step way, using visual as well as auditory instructions. ❖ Be clear about equipment and methodology involved in any task. ❖ Clarify what will constitute completion of the task.
<p>SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Identify those areas of the curriculum that learners with Autism will find particularly problematic such as estimation, empathy and figurative language. ❖ Link learning to student's existing knowledge or area of interest.
<p>CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Ensure that delivery is sufficiently clear and visual to avoid sensory overload. ❖ Use individualised approaches for engaging reticent students. ❖ Provide individualised and meaningful positive feedback for engagement and achievement, for example, choosing time after the completion of a set task. ❖ Encourage self evaluation of work to support self awareness. ❖ Make use of individualised strategies to support emotion regulation.
<p>ASSESSMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Within B squared mark components of a particular level that the student will never achieve on account of their core Autism difficulties. ❖ Ensure that assessment methodology maximises student's ability to demonstrate skills or knowledge. ❖ Make use of photographs and video to record achievement that has a transitory existence. ❖ Be clear about the difference in assessment between skills and understanding, for example, the ability to complete an arithmetic task but not apply it to a practical situation.

COMMUNICATION

Young people with Autism find it easier to process visual information than spoken information. The spoken word is here for a moment and then gone. If it has not been understood it is frequently followed by more language, often delivered with greater emotional content, raising arousal levels and reducing the likelihood of understanding still further. Visual information, by contrast, may be looked at for as long as is necessary to process the message.

At The Garth School a wide range of visual systems are used to support the communication of children with Autism, based on the child's age and developmental level. In general terms, visual supports to communication become more abstract as children become more confident communicators.

Examples of visual systems in use at the school include:

Objects of reference:

This is an object which is used to represent an activity and may be shown to a child to prepare him or her for what is to happen next. For example, a drinking cup to indicate snack time.

Photographs:

Photographs may be used to indicate an object, for example, a photograph of a pair of scissors on the drawer used to store them.

Line drawings:

Line drawings may be used in the same way as photographs but with a slightly higher level of abstraction. The use of line drawings may be helpful to a child who could become confused if a detail in a photograph is incorrect.

Symbols:

At The Garth School we use a standard set of symbols from the Widget (writing with symbols) programme. These may be used to label resources or on individual schedules. These are representational and are normally used in conjunction with text.

Text:

As a universally recognised form of representational communication the written word is the ultimate objective in the hierarchy of visual support.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUAL SCAFFOLDING

Visual scaffolding to support communication is used in labels around the school and also in the preparation of student's individual timetables. The use of a visual timetable is often essential in helping a young person with Autism to feel secure in the predictability of the environment they are working in. It can also be an essential tool for helping young people to manage either planned or unexpected change.

It is a very common error to remove visual scaffolding from young people with Autism too early based on observations that "he can follow what I say perfectly". There are various reasons why this is a dangerous conclusion to draw. Firstly, young people may not actually be following what is said but completing actions that have been done previously on many occasions or imitating others. For example, a child may correctly respond to the instruction "time to collect your equipment for PE" by picking up on cues other than the verbal instruction used. Secondly, we know that many people with Autism (in common with neurotypicals) can process language more successfully when they are in a calm state. In a heightened state of arousal they may be much less able to process language and a visual representation of the message will be an essential support to communication.

MAKATON

Makaton is a form of signing designed specifically for people with learning difficulties which can be a very useful support to spoken language for children with Autism. Makaton usage across the school is supported by the 'sign of the day' practice at the beginning of the day and at lunchtime.

Makaton training is offered to all staff. It is the responsibility of individual members of staff to practice and make use of the skill they have learnt in their daily classroom practice and interactions with children.

PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is a structured approach to using symbols for communication through a series of levels. At the earliest levels the focus is on enhancing the motivation to communicate through the exchange of a symbol for something the child finds desirable. In time, after various intermediate stages, children move on to more full use of symbols for expressive communication. PECS is therefore a very useful system for supporting communication in children with Autism who may often lack an initial drive to communicate and the verbal skills to support expressive communication.

COMMUNICATION AIDS

At The Garth School, we make use of a wide range of IT solutions to the individual communication difficulties experienced by our students. Increasingly, iPads are offering flexible and relatively low cost solutions to the communication difficulties of students with Autism.

COMMUNICATE: IN PRINT

At The Garth School we make considerable use of the software programme 'Communicate: In print' (CiP) to support our students with Autism. CiP is a word processing programme which provides visual symbols to support written text. It is a useful support to social stories (to help children with their understanding of the social world around them) and instructional stories (to help children to follow classroom expectations or the requirements of a multi-step task). Whilst CiP provides symbols to go with most words, it is usually more helpful to only include symbols for key words.

SPOKEN LANGUAGE

When using verbal forms of communication it is important to be aware of the danger of overloading people with Autism, causing stress and the potential for undesirable behavioural consequences. Consequently, it is important to:

- ❖ ensure that the listening environment is optimised by reducing background noise
- ❖ gain attention by using the student's name and requesting listening but not asking for or expecting eye contact, which may be both distracting and distressing
- ❖ speak one person at a time, usually with one adult leading and others present staying silent
- ❖ use as little touch as possible
- ❖ use as little facial expression as possible
- ❖ avoid gestures unless using Makaton to support your verbal communication
- ❖ speak slowly, clearly, calmly and avoid 'shouty' or hectoring language
- ❖ minimise the use of idiom, slang or marked intonation
- ❖ use the minimum number of words to communicate your message clearly
- ❖ allow plenty of time for processing before expecting a response
- ❖ after allowing processing time use the same language structure to repeat the message
- ❖ remember to praise successful listening

There will be times when it is necessary to give verbal instructions without visual support. For some students this will be a less than optimal form of communication and visual cues will always be desirable additions to spoken language.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

A number of children with Autism follow specific speech and language therapy programmes. These programmes will be devised by Speech and Language Therapists (SaLT) in liaison with parents and class teams and delivered in school and at home.

SENSORY ISSUES

One theory to explain what underlies the sensory processing difficulties of many people with Autism is that mechanisms are developed in early childhood to control the flood of incoming stimuli which threatens to overwhelm (Bogdashina, 2003).

This may be achieved by:

- ❖ attending to only one sensory channel at a time
- ❖ avoiding direct perception (for example, by not looking directly at people)
- ❖ by switching off a sensory channel when overwhelmed (for example, leading to the common suspicion of hearing impairment in young children with AUTISM)
- ❖ by compensating for difficulties in one sensory area by deploying another (for example, by tapping a familiar object to confirm what it is)
- ❖ by becoming immersed, in 'resonance' with another object (for example, losing oneself in the vividness of a particular colour)
- ❖ through a particularly vivid form of 'daydreaming'

These 'defence mechanisms' can both make the student with Autism unavailable for conventional learning experiences and make them likely to experience great stress if a someone cuts across the strategy they are deploying with a particular demand. Consequently, at The Garth School School we have a range of strategies in place to keep the sensory diet we provide for our students manageable and thereby reduce the need for sensory defensive strategies to be deployed.

It is a central part of our school ethos that all of our children should have access to the full range of experiences offered within the school. For this reason, all students belong to mixed ability class groups, with similarly aged peers.

SENSORY PROFILES

Sometimes a teacher or other member of staff may become concerned about a pattern of behaviours displayed by a child, for example, placing hands over their ears for extended periods of time or repeatedly screaming without obvious cause. In these cases it may be

helpful to complete a sensory profile for the child, identifying areas of hyper (over) and hypo (under) sensitivity. We may then make adaptations to the child's programme to help.

Recommendations to support the child may involve:

- ❖ changes to the environment
- ❖ planned desensitisation to a particular stimulus that is likely to be unavoidable in the school context
- ❖ a particular exercise programme designed to aid organising, alerting, calming and modulating levels of arousal
- ❖ providing specialist equipment such as ear defenders, chewing tubes, weighted blankets or specialist seating

SENSORY CIRCUITS

Sensory circuits are activity programmes that are designed to alert, organise and calm the sensory processing of children. Children at The Garth School can follow sensory circuits, which are not an intervention exclusive to students with Autism. The range of activities that are involved can include: balancing, jumping, catching, throwing, spinning and receiving pressure. The equipment required includes: trampettes, therapy balls, hoops, wobble boards, spinning boards, benches and bean bags. We monitor the impact of a sensory circuit to determine whether or not it is a helpful intervention.

Occupational Therapists suggest that sensory circuits may be useful for children who display the following behavioural characteristics:

- ❖ constant fiddling in class
- ❖ slow to start work and constantly missing cues
- ❖ difficulty organising self
- ❖ lethargic and dreamy
- ❖ poor coordination and balance
- ❖ known sensory processing difficulties
- ❖ constant rocking
- ❖ difficulty paying attention
- ❖ lacking confidence to join in

It is easy to see how many of these behaviours may arise from the core difficulties associated with Autism. However, it is important to note that fiddling may help some children to self regulate and concentrate on tasks and so it may not always be desirable to try and extinguish such behaviours.

ACTIVE BREAKS

Active breaks are a less formal support to a student's sensory organisation and processing than sensory circuits and may be built into a student's day at fixed times or used flexibly as required.

An active break may take a range of different forms based on a child's Individual needs and may include:

- ❖ a walk outside
- ❖ time spent on particular pieces of the outdoor play equipment
- ❖ use of a particular part of the equipment used in sensory circuits
- ❖ a period of deep pressure

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

At The Garth School we understand that behaviour is a form of communication. We never conceptualise challenging behaviour as being located within the child as a personality trait but perceive it as providing us with a message about the young person's understanding of the world they are struggling to engage with. When we determine that any particular behaviour is impacting negatively on the student's ability to learn, the student's safety or well-being, the learning or safety of other students, the safety of staff or the smooth running of the school then we will plan an intervention to support change.

Children with Autism who experience challenging behaviour have a behaviour support plan drawn up by the class teacher in liaison with classroom staff and parents. This describes the circumstances that may lead to behavioural challenge from the student and the responses that must be deployed by staff. Consistency of approach, including in some cases the exact symbols or language to be used, is essential in helping young people with Autism to re-

establish their emotional equilibrium at times of stress and so all staff working with a particular child need to be familiar with and have easy access to a child's behaviour plan.

In order to support behavioural change and the development of increasingly pro-social behaviour patterns we operate a simple 'plan-do-review' hypothesis testing model:

1

What do we believe is causing the behaviour we are observing?

- ❖ Is this behaviour related to something in the environment?
- ❖ Is this behaviour arising from a difficulty in social comprehension?
- ❖ Does this behaviour arise from a communication difficulty, either receptive or expressive?
- ❖ Is the young person being asked to cope with too many changes without adequate warning or preparation?

2

Based on our responses to the questions above we may seek to implement changes and introduce these into the behaviour plan. Such changes related to the hypotheses above may include:

- ❖ changes to the environment, sensory programmes to support the young person in managing the environment, direct teaching of a new skill such as relaxation to support self regulation
- ❖ the use of a social story, changes in adult interaction style, direct teaching of social approach skills or support for other students in changing their approach towards the young person concerned
- ❖ changes to adult communication methods including curriculum delivery and inter-personal exchanges, the use of communication aids to support the young person in expressing their emotions and wishes in socially acceptable ways
- ❖ review the timetable that the young person is following, revise the scheduling system in place for the young person to ensure that it is sufficiently clear and supportive
- ❖ introduce a behaviour plan with a clear target, recording mechanism and reward system
- ❖ teach a new skill, for example: relaxation, removal to a quiet area, a new communication system, social approach skills. Where a new skill is being taught ensure that adequate tuition and positive reinforcement of successful use is in place

3

Review progress after an agreed period of not more than 6 weeks. Repeat the cycle of steps above, making further changes to the behaviour profile based on what has been learnt through the previous plan – do – review cycle.

SELF AWARENESS

Some of our young people may, at times, be quite overwhelmed and display behaviour that can be distressing and extremely challenging to those who are new to it. Such behaviour may include spitting, biting or uncontrolled lashing out.

Episodes of challenging behaviour can be extremely emotionally charged for adults. Such episodes may impact on staff in unexpected ways, particularly those who are new or inexperienced. It is very important that staff remain self-aware in challenging situations to support our vulnerable students through them. Staff anxiety or upset can easily communicate itself to vulnerable students heightening their concern and behavioural challenge.

Specific management techniques will be found in each child's behaviour plan, but in general terms:

- ❖ keep speech clear and calm. In general, less is better
- ❖ maintain a composed facial expression
- ❖ maintain a relaxed body posture that is not confrontational
- ❖ be directive and positive, communicating what you wish to happen rather than what is unacceptable
- ❖ hand over to another member of staff if feeling overwhelmed or losing personal control
- ❖ be prepared to accept help from another member of staff who may notice heightened stress levels in you
- ❖ use agreed interventions

After such an episode we understand that members of staff may require a break from direct contact with young people to recover their equilibrium. Senior managers will typically take the responsibility for offering such a break but staff should also request this themselves if required. Subject to the immediate needs of the whole school community such requests will be granted wherever possible.

Following a significant incident, including those involving physical aggression, a formal debrief will be conducted with all staff who have been involved and led by a member of the senior management team. Staff report these debriefs to be very supportive and an excellent opportunity for reflection and moving on. There is a formal written protocol for such debriefs which is available to all staff.

PHYSICAL INTERVENTION

All staff at The Garth School are trained in Team Teach; an accredited approach to de-escalation and planned physical intervention. Whilst physical intervention is used as the last stage of a hierarchy of interventions there are times when it can provide security for young people with Autism and allow for the recovery of emotional equilibrium. When age and level of understanding allows, physical intervention plans are discussed and agreed with children.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

As a special school for children with complex learning needs The Garth School meets the needs of a wide range of students with learning difficulties. There are times when this means that it is not possible to create the types of environment that one might find in an Autism specific school. However, this also provides opportunities for social learning that would not be on offer in an Autism only context. Many of our young people are highly socially motivated and will approach our students with Autism seeking interaction and engagement. We seek to make the most of these opportunities, teaching all our young people specific social approach skills and teaching students with Autism how to accept invitations to engagement from others, or alternatively, to make clear in socially acceptable ways that these are not welcome.

Opportunities for social engagement and development exist throughout the school day:

- ❖ in whole class activities
- ❖ in paired and group activities
- ❖ through community based activities
- ❖ at lunchtimes
- ❖ at playtimes

All teachers are expected to include one social development target on the IEPs of children.

SOCIAL STORIES

Social stories are a highly effective intervention used widely at The Garth School to support children in understanding the perspectives of others and the rules by which society operates, by explaining these in written form. Although the originator of this methodology, Carol Gray, has produced a wealth of examples in her books we very rarely find that an 'off the shelf' example is suitable. The degree of variance in the particular context that is proving difficult for the child to manage, the cognitive and reading ability of the child and the need to adapt each story to his or her interest means that a personalised version is almost always required.

assist.

The types of situation for which social stories have proved helpful include:

- ❖ Supporting a child in learning the importance of cleaning teeth and developing a regular teeth cleaning habit.
- ❖ Learning about socially acceptable touch.
- ❖ Anticipating and managing a change to home / school transport.
- ❖ Understanding why it is not acceptable to shout at adults when upset.

Intensive Interaction

Intensive Interaction is a programme to promote the very earliest stages of social engagement which aims to help the young person to:

- ❖ Enjoy being with another person
- ❖ Develop the ability to attend to that person
- ❖ Increase concentration and attention span
- ❖ Learn to do sequences of activity with the other person
- ❖ Take turns in exchanges of behaviour
- ❖ Share personal space
- ❖ Understand and use eye contacts
- ❖ Understand and use facial expressions
- ❖ Understand and use non-verbal communication
- ❖ Use vocalisations with meaning

FLEXIBILITY OF THOUGHT

A core characteristic of Autism is 'a strong resistance to change and an aversion to novelty'
(Frith, 2008)

*A person with Autism 'starts to suffer if they encounter unexpected change.'
They possess a 'strong drive to systemise events, to render them as near to predictable as they can'*
(Baron-Cohen, 2008)

Associated with this drive people with Autism may find it hard to:

- ❖ predict what may happen next and thereby prepare mentally for it
- ❖ plan for the future
- ❖ anticipate dangers
- ❖ engage in creative and imaginative play patterns
- ❖ manage new or unfamiliar situations

At The Garth School we seek to build the ability of our students to think flexibly by maximising the benefits of unplanned change and sensitively introducing planned changes to routines and habits.

Some examples of each of these are as follows:

Unplanned change

- ❖ The swimming pool is closed due to an imbalance of the chemicals. A brief explanatory story may be written using Communicate: In Print and shared with the student; a 'change' symbol introduced onto the child's schedule alongside the replacement activity.

- ❖ The whiteboard is unusable due to a failure in the internet connection. A 'broken' symbol may be attached to the whiteboard; an alternative activity clarified; reassurance given 'it's OK to change'.
- ❖ This type of unplanned change may be supported by a social story explaining how unexpected change does sometimes happen and that with adult support the child can cope: 'it's OK to change'. This will need to be personalised to each student based on their age, reading skills and level of understanding.

Planned change

- ❖ Taking children on educational visits to new places. A brief explanatory story with pictures of the venue; a written schedule clarifying the stages in the activity.
- ❖ Changing class at the end of the academic year. An information booklet with photographs of the new classroom staff and the new room (providing that this will not be changed before entry to the class).
- ❖ The use of a 'surprise', 'change' or 'choice' symbol on the child's schedule.
- ❖ Offering guided choice of activity through a choosing strip with an option to be selected from. Encouraging choice making in this way helps students with developing their own planning skills.
- ❖ Changing the order of activities during a session, the member of staff a child is working with or their working location.
- ❖ Introduction of new foods into a lunch box. A 'menu card' illustrating the order in which foods will have to be eaten with less favoured to be eaten first.

The preparedness of the individual child to cope with these changes will need to be very carefully considered and the appropriate level of scaffolding provided.

MEDICAL ISSUES

Many children with Autism have another medical condition alongside it. Examples include ADHD, Epilepsy, Gastrointestinal disorders, Fragile X syndrome, Obsessive compulsive disorder and Anxiety disorder. Members of each class team need to be aware of the details of the medical care plan for each child in the class.

Some young people with a restricted diet or oral sensitivity may be very reluctant to take medication orally. Carefully planned interventions using social stories and the advice of the speech and language therapist and occupational therapist may help to overcome this reluctance.

Related to the sensory and communication difficulties experienced by many young people with Autism it may be hard for the child to identify the location of any pain they may be experiencing and describe this accurately to a third person. Using a visual support such as a body map and a word arrow using a meaningful word for the child may help overcome this difficulty.

In addition to the medical conditions listed above many students with Autism experience broader health and well-being difficulties. It is very common for children with Autism to have unusual sleep patterns, typically requiring less sleep than most others of their age. A restricted diet, often thought to relate to sensory issues with certain foods, is another very common issue. At The Garth School we will support parental wishes in relation to their child's diet. If required, we work closely with parents to support any programmes in relation to food consumption.