



Supporting children and young people to manage social communication differences, including those on the Autism Spectrum.



**Emma Lane**  
Clinical Lead for Autism

**Sophie Brooks**  
Additional Needs Learning Mentor,  
MA Inclusion and Special Educational Needs and  
Disability.

# Contents

- 3 Introduction
- 5 Areas of need
- 7 How can the young person be supported?
- 9 Neurodiversity
- 10 The child/young person's perspective
- 12 Talking about diagnosis
- 13 Demand avoidant style of Autism
- 14 Supporting communication in school
- 15 Supporting communication in the classroom
- 18 Supporting social communication skills
- 20 References and resources

20

## Introduction

The advice in this pack will help support Autistic people and those with social communication needs. The child does not need to have an Autism diagnosis to follow the advice.

### Strengths

Many young people who are Autistic or who have social communication needs have communication strengths in their grammar, vocabulary and speech. They also often have many other areas of strength including visual learning, memory skills, pattern-based learning, analytical skills, the ability to focus 100% and see something through to the end. Young people will often pursue their interests to develop specialist skills in these areas. They are often very organised and punctual, with a high level of self-awareness, approaching tasks logically. Their analytical minds can help them to come up with new perspectives, always striving for improvement and perfection. These are all skills which are highly desired by employers in the future.

Some young people can learn how to present themselves in a way where they appear to “fit in” with their peers (‘masking’), often by learning and copying the behaviours of others. Although these learners may be able to speak clearly and use a wide range of words and sentences, they may have more subtle communication differences. These subtle difficulties can cause much internal distress and have an impact on mental health – so it is crucial to recognise and address these difficulties in the right way. Masking in itself also places a huge strain on learners and can lead to exhaustion.

The communication differences these young people experience are less easy to spot when they feel calm and regulated and are in a familiar environment, but can still have an important impact on their lives.

**The main areas of communication difference are usually:**

### Social communication

Differences in understanding and using the rules around interacting with others. This can lead to misunderstandings, disagreements, friendship issues and feelings of isolation, and may sometimes result in distressed behaviour.

### Auditory processing

Differences in processing spoken information (and also often wider differences in processing sound and other sensory information). This means that while young people can understand words and grammar, they do not always process what is said to them, especially if they are anxious or tired, or if there is background noise.

### Higher level (‘pragmatic’) language

Difficulties in understanding abstract or ambiguous language. This includes non-literal language like idioms or metaphors (‘It’s raining cats and dogs’), or indirect language such as indirect requests (‘*Would you like to open the door?*’). This again can lead to misunderstandings. Some young people may be able to understand words but struggle to understand the meaning of those words in context. This is particularly the case where words can have more than one meaning.

The evidence shows that children and young people with social communication differences benefit most from having the adults around them use specific strategies to support functional social communication throughout the day in real-life situations.

This is because we learn more easily from our own experiences of concrete situations, rather than from abstract information presented in an artificial situation. Young people can struggle to transfer learning from one situation to another (generalisation), especially from abstract to concrete, i.e. from a theoretical scenario to applying the skills in daily life.

This booklet gives information about these areas of difference, and about the approaches and strategies that can support. It also explains the role of the people who work as a team around the child.

## Areas of need

### Social Communication

When we talk to and interact with others, we need to follow certain 'rules'. These rules help us to communicate smoothly and effectively and achieve what we want to achieve. They help us to 'get on' with people.

These rules are often not explicit – we pick them up naturally as we grow up, through watching others interact and through interacting ourselves. They do include some 'politeness' rules, but mostly they are about things that are more invisible. These rules are based on neuro-typical expectations.

Examples of these rules include:

- Greet people when you meet them and say goodbye when you leave.
- Talk about the same thing as the other person – don't suddenly introduce a new topic.
- Take an interest in what the other person is saying – ask questions if you do not understand, and find out more information.
- Give enough information so the other person knows what you mean.
- But, don't give too much information, so the other person gets confused or bored.
- Don't overshare. Understand the boundaries depending on who you are talking to.
- Take turns in conversation fairly – don't do all the talking. But also, don't stay silent all the time. Create a balance between speaking and listening. Know when it's your turn to speak and your turn to listen.
- Don't talk to your teacher in the same way you talk to your mates (e.g. don't swear or use slang with your teacher).

Young people may find it easier to learn concrete and explicit rules, and these more abstract and subtle social rules may be trickier to learn – especially since the rules often change depending on the situation and who else is there (e.g. talking to teacher in classroom vs talking to mum at home).

Recent research shows that Autistic people are less likely to have difficulties with social interaction when communicating with other Autistic people. They find it more difficult to interpret the communication of non-Autistic people, as their experiences of the world are very different. Equally, studies have shown that non-Autistic people can struggle to read the emotions of Autistic people. This is referred to as the Double Empathy problem. This reframes our thinking that Autistic people are 'disordered' in this area, rather that they are in the minority and are expected to fit in with the social norms of non-Autistic people. [An introduction to the double empathy problem \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

### Auditory Processing

Auditory processing means being able to process and take in what is said, in order to understand it and plan an appropriate response.

- There may be a delay in processing. This may be short (6 – 10 seconds), longer (several minutes) or the child may even process the information later that day.
- This is not necessarily because processing is slower, but because they are trying to process more information, including any background noise and other

information from the situation. This means that the ability to process can vary depending on the situation.

- Factors such as noisy classrooms, more than one person talking at once or background music can make auditory processing even harder.
- It is important to give visual information where possible. Children with social communication needs or who are Autistic tend to be stronger visual learners which is why visual supports such as calendars, diaries, visual schedules and checklists are useful.

Some young people will use a 'filler' (such as 'no' or 'what?') to show you that they have heard but have not processed the information yet. It is best to give a few moments of quiet, rather than respond to this, to allow the processing to take place. Don't shy away from silence.

Sensory overwhelm, emotional overwhelm or difficulties in processing language or managing social situations can all lead to a young person experiencing a feeling of burn-out, or 'freeze'. This can happen to the most articulate young person, and may lead to periods of non-verbal withdrawal. Some young people may be unable to speak in some social situations. This can be referred to as situational or selective mutism.

### Higher level 'pragmatic' language

Pragmatic language skills include understanding ambiguous or abstract language, such as non-literal language like idioms and metaphors. It also includes being able to infer information that is not explicitly stated, make predictions and think flexibly about what others might say in a situation or how they might feel. Inference is a complex skill which requires us to:

- understand implicit information and cause and effect
- recognise the emotions and motives of other people
- deal with a variety of possible outcomes of a situation
- recognise the point of view of other people.

Being able to use these skills is essential to access the curriculum. For example, reading comprehension tasks may require the learner to evaluate characters' behaviour or justify their actions.

These skills are also essential to daily life, especially understanding and responding to social situations. Secondary school can be very tricky for people who don't understand sarcasm or jokes, or who can't recognise the viewpoint of others. These skills are best learnt in real life situations through discussion and coaching.

These differences can mean that young people may use their language skills in a rigid or inappropriate way for the circumstances, as viewed by neuro-typical people. Often, this can lead to misinterpretations and difficulties managing social situations.

## How can the young person be supported?

It is not possible or appropriate to teach children these skills through direct therapy. Instead they need real-time coaching from supportive adults throughout their day. The emphasis should not be on teaching children to be neuro-typical but to recognise their needs in a neuro-typical environment. Differences in flexibility of thought make it hard to generalise skills from a theoretical practice session into real life. Although young people may 'know' the strategies in theory, they may find it difficult to apply the theory in practice. A co-regulation approach, where the adult uses interactions to support the child to manage their thoughts, feelings and actions, is important, as this allows the young person to practice these strategies in real-life, meaningful, and personal situations.

It is vital that everyone working with the young person understands their individual needs, and how they impact on the young person's ability to process and manage the demands of daily life. This enables and empowers children to function in daily life and manage the difficulties they face.

School staff and parents may need help to understand these needs and to use a range of strategies to support the learner and know how to access other information which may be useful in the future. This support may come from the speech and language therapy (SLT) service and from other services like STEPS (Specialist Teaching and Educational Psychology Services), Autism Outreach and the SSEN (specialist service for special educational needs). Other support may be available from Parent Carer Services, Clinical Psychology and the National Autistic Society.

### Is Speech and Language Therapy needed?

SLT service can do a detailed assessment of communication if this is an area of particular concern. This may take several sessions. After this, the most effective approach is to make sure parents and education staff understand the young person's strengths, needs, and the support they need. It is vital to focus on helping the child use their own strengths to apply strategies themselves to manage their own needs.

This pack gives information about how to do this. The SLT service can give any training and consultation needed to help schools and parents put this support in place. The young person's needs are likely to continue in the long term and so they will need ongoing support from the team around them. The SLT Service is unlikely to be involved in the long term and will signpost the team to appropriate resources. You may wish to visit the SLT Service website for further details about the service:

[www.speech.derby.nhs.uk](http://www.speech.derby.nhs.uk)

### Who else could be involved?

In school, the **SENCo** (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) is the key contact and will coordinate the young person's support to be delivered through the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Graduated Response. This means that school should use targeted supports to help the young person in school.

An **Educational Psychologist** may need to assess the young person's learning and emotional skills, particularly if applying for an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP). The SENCo will tell parents if this is needed and will arrange for the child to be seen.

If the family need help at home, an [Early Help Assessment](#) may help. This will lead to a Team Around the Family (TAF) meeting, which will identify any referrals or actions needed to help the young person and their family. This is normally arranged through the school.

The child's sensory needs may be subtle but can have a significant impact on a child's ability to function. The [Occupational Therapy Service](#) provides a parent course for which parents may self-refer: Understanding Sensory Skills – Call 0300 123 4586, Option 2 then Option 5.

### Useful websites

- [Middletown Centre for Autism](#) Has an online sensory processing resource containing sensory activities for each sense, split by age groups. It also contains a sensory audit and practical tips for the classroom.
- [Sensory differences - a guide for all audiences](#) - from the National Autistic Society.
- [Derby & Derbyshire Emotional Health & Wellbeing](#) For parents/carers and professionals in Derby and Derbyshire. Includes detailed information about behaviour, communication, anxiety, sleep, eating, hyperactivity and much more. Also contains resources, signposting to organisations and a wide range of useful videos. Click on the neurodiversity tab to explore the content.
- [Autism Information and Advice Service](#) – new hub for Autistic adults and for professionals and carers in Derby City and Derbyshire.
- [Spectrum Gaming](#) – an online community for Autistic young people. They also run courses for parents around Autism acceptance.

### Derby City

- [Graduated Response Leaflet for Parents](#) - Information about the Graduated Response
- [STEPs Service Social Communication & Autism Team](#) - Specialist teaching team supporting autism inclusion in schools in Derby
- [Parent Carers Together C.I.C - Home | Facebook](#) - Parent-run group supporting parents of children with additional needs in Derby City
- Children's Centre Autism Champions - support and help after diagnosis:
  - Osmaston/ Allenton 01332 715620
  - Mackworth/ Morley 01332 208175
  - Becket Childrens Centre – 01332 640250

### Derbyshire County

- [Graduated Response Derbyshire](#) – information about how the graduated response to SEND works in Derbyshire schools
- [Autism - Derbyshire County Council](#) – Derbyshire County Council Autism information hub – with links to many other helpful local services
- [Derbyshire Autism friendly schools file](#) – Derbyshire's Autism friendly schools approach
- [Support Service for Special Educational Needs](#) – Specialist teaching service:
- [Autism Outreach Team](#) – Specialist teaching team supporting autism inclusion in schools in Derbyshire
- [Parent Carer Voice](#) – Parent-run group supporting parents of children with additional needs in Derbyshire
- [Derbyshire Area Sensory Processing Needs package](#) - Sensory processing support toolkit for schools

## Neurodiversity

The neuro-diversity movement has helped us understand a lot more about Autism, from the lived experience of Autistic people. Just as we are diverse in gender, race and culture, we are also diverse in how we process and make sense of information. Every Autistic person is different and may identify in a different way. Many prefer 'Autistic person' and some prefer 'person with Autism'. Some identify as 'neuro-diverse', and others prefer the term 'Autism Spectrum Condition', rather than labelling 'it' as a disorder. Autistic people are as diverse in their personalities and characteristics as people without Autism (aka 'neurotypical').

It is important to work with young people to help them develop awareness of their own social communication skills and learn how to best use their strengths and strategies to manage the ever-changing demands of the neurotypical world.

This should be done in a way that is accepting and mindful of their neurodiversity. Autistic adults report that it is useful to know how neurotypical people think and function so that they can choose whether or how to adapt their own behaviour. This adaptation takes a lot of energy and conscious thought and it can be exhausting to be so "socially switched on" all day. These factors should be at the heart of a co-planning approach, where appropriate, to developing the support put in place for Autistic young people.

The following videos, blogs and websites may be useful:

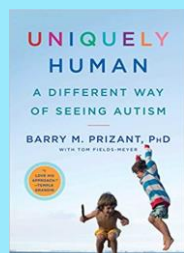
- [Autism Myths: Full film - YouTube](#)
- [Amazing Things Happen - by Alexander Amelines - YouTube](#)
- [Autistic Not Weird - Insights from an Autistic Teacher and Speaker](#)
- [Neurodivergent Rebel – Rebelling against a culture that values assimilation over individuality.](#)

[Aucademy](#) - Academy's fundamental aim is to educate Autistic people and non-autistic people about Autistic experience, as taught by an Autistic team of educators and collaborators.

They run a range of Facebook groups around specific topics: [Aucademy - Education for everyone on Autistic experience](#). They also run a Discord server for Autistic people aged 13 and over to discuss special interests: <https://discord.gg/xJtvuyQS6X>

[LEANS and neurodiversity](#) – LEANS is a free curriculum to introduce pupils aged 8-11 to the concept of neurodiversity and help them explore how it impacts school experiences. It is a teacher-delivered resource for the whole class.

[Walk In My Shoes](#) – a short animation to increase understanding of neurodiversity, based on a 14 year old's perspective.



The book 'Uniquely Human' by Barry Prizant offers a different perspective on Autism.

## The child/young person's perspective

Young people have different perspectives on their experiences. Some have little awareness of their differences. Others have a lot, which may lead to anxiety or self-criticism. It is important to support young people to understand and, more importantly, celebrate their individuality, and find a platform through which to relate to others on the spectrum.

Children can find social interaction extremely tiring. They may appear to be interacting effortlessly, but the impact afterwards can be huge. They will often mask their differences, feeling under pressure to behave in a neurotypical way. While neurotypical people can easily subconsciously assess and respond to social situations, Autistic young people have to make a huge conscious effort, with constant problem solving. This can be exhausting. Imagine navigating your way through the complex and unpredictable social expectations of a school day and being asked to complete learning tasks on top of this.

The impacts of this exhaustion on children can be very different. Children may need to lie down or sleep afterwards and can often present as withdrawn when returning home or to a perceived 'safe space'. They may need a rest day after a large amount of interaction with no breaks. Or they may be burnt-out when returning home from school. The processing demands of the school day gradually build up, resulting in the pressure exploding in challenging behaviours on arriving home. This has been termed the 'cola bottle effect'. 'Spoon theory' is also useful to think about. Young people have only so many spoons of social energy for the day. They may have used all of their spoons at school, with none left to cope with the rest of their day.

Young people may take things out on those closest to them because those are the only people they may feel comfortable to be their true selves around. Those closest to us all are our safe people, often in our safe, familiar environment.

### Teenage years

The teenage years can be difficult for any young person and may present different challenges for an Autistic person. Middletown Centre for Autism has an online teenage resource with a variety of useful information: [Middletown Centre for Autism \(middletownautism.com\)](https://middletownautism.com)

[MindJam | Empowering and Supporting Young People](#) - MindJam offers emotional support and guidance for children and adolescents through gaming and game design.

[Autism Understood](#) is a website developed by Spectrum Gaming with Autistic young people for Autistic young people. It covers a variety of topics including Autistic differences.

## Girls

Older girls may have more subtle differences which are more difficult to spot. Autistic girls may mask even more than boys and can feel intense pressure to present themselves in the same way as their peers. This subtlety and masking can result in them being identified later and they may experience mental health issues. Autistic girls may:

- Use delayed imitation to pick up social skills
- Be on the edge of social activities
- Be more aware of others and feel a need to interact
- Often be mothered in primary school and bullied in secondary
- Be more socially immature and a passive member of friendship groups
- Tend to have one special friend (who can become their obsession)
- Be unable to do social 'chit chat'
- Have better imagination than boys, with more pretend play
- Escape into fiction
- Often use scripted play
- Prefer to be in control during play
- Collect information about people rather than things
- Have mainstream interests but the quality and intensity is different.

This video shows different styles of interaction in three younger children with Autism. It features a primary aged girl, particularly looking at the subtle differences in her social interaction skills: [The Birthday Party - Awtistiaeth Cymru | Autism Wales | National Autism Team](#)

The National Autistic Society provide an online training module about women and girls with autism: [Women and girls \(autism.org.uk\)](#)

'The girl with the curly hair' project have a variety of online training courses: [Autism eCourses | Online Autism Courses | Autism E-Learning \(thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk\)](#)

Libby is a 13 year old girl who writes a Twitter blog [Libby Scott Author \(@BlogLibby\) / Twitter](#). She has also written a book about her experiences: [Can You See Me? | BookTrust](#)

[Autistic Girls Network](#) – lots of resources including an informative section on reasonable adjustments that may help in school.

['There's no one way to be autistic' - BBC Ideas](#) – A short (4 mins) video from a female author on her diagnosis of autism and on how autism can present differently.

## Talking about diagnosis

These resources may help with discussing and understanding a diagnosis:

[My Autism and Me](#) - a CBBC Newsround Special video

[Autism Education Trust](#) - the site has a range of films by young people about their diagnosis.

[Telling your child about their diagnosis](#) – a guide for parents and carers from the National Autistic Society website

[All Cats are on the Autism Spectrum](#) – a book for children exploring autism in a light-hearted way

[Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome](#) - a book written by a teenager with Asperger syndrome

[The Big A Me, Myself & Autism](#) - useful resource from TES (Times Educational Supplement)

Demand avoidant style of Autism

## Demand avoidant style of Autism

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is rarely diagnosed separately in Derbyshire, but may be identified as demand avoidant tendencies as part of the Autism Spectrum. Recently this has been termed as 'demand anxiety'. Some people in the Autism community prefer to refer to this as Persistent Drive for Autonomy. Typical support strategies do not tend to work. Children who are demand avoidant need an invitational approach rather than directive.

- Use language such as 'I wonder if...' or 'I think I might try...' rather than giving instructions
- You can use visuals to back up choices (e.g. a visual timetable to negotiate around tasks to be completed), but not to be directive
- The learner needs to be on a level with the adult in negotiation
- Provide ground rules e.g. stay safe, but negotiate beyond that
- Be aware of processing difficulties, these can be more significant
- Young people will measure perceived demand, not actual demand, and tolerance will fluctuate. Balance your demand with their tolerance
- You will need to be extremely flexible in your approach, following their lead, providing invitations to take part without applying any pressure
- Be prepared to be in the moment with your young person. Through a calm invitational approach you can make a connection.

### Useful websites:

- [PDA Society](#) – website for the pathological Demand Avoidance Society
- [Positive-PDA-booklet.pdf \(pdasociety.org.uk\)](#) – A useful booklet of top tips and information.

### Derbyshire Neuro-hubs

Derbyshire and Derby City Neuro-hubs opened in 2023. These provide information, support and signposting to families in relation to neuro-diversity. They provide drop-ins, phone appointments and follow up. [Four new community drop-in hubs opened for neurodiverse children and young people » Joined Up Care Derbyshire](#)

#### Derby City

St James' Centre, Malcolm Street, DE23 8LU

Mobile:07561 856320

[neurohub@stjamescentre.org](mailto:neurohub@stjamescentre.org)

#### South Derbyshire

114 Church Street, Church Gresley, Swadlincote, DE11 9NR Tel:01332 228790

[ch@citizensadvicemidmercia.org.uk](mailto:ch@citizensadvicemidmercia.org.uk)

#### Central Derbyshire

Derbyshire Autism Services Group, Unit 3a Unicorn Business Park, Wellington St, Ripley, DE5 3EH 07510 928349 [neurohub@derbyshireautismservices.org](mailto:neurohub@derbyshireautismservices.org)

#### North Derbyshire/High Peak

Monkey Park Community Hub, 128a Chester Street, Chesterfield S40 1DN

07874 941890 [neurohub@fair-play.co.uk](mailto:neurohub@fair-play.co.uk)

Zink HQ, Clough Street, Buxton SK17 6LU

07498 892525

[neurohub@zink.org.uk](mailto:neurohub@zink.org.uk)

## Supporting communication in school

The school environment can pose a range of challenges for young people. This may relate to communication and interaction as well as broader issues such as the sensory environment. Young people may need access to a quiet area to take a sensory break, structured into their day to reduce the chance of overload. Access to familiar, supportive adults during the school day is also helpful.

Teachers and staff should work with the young person to create a safe and welcoming space at school. The following resources may help:

### [How Can Schools Better Support Neurodivergent Young People](#)

[Teacherspayteachers.com](#) has a range of free resources (register for free to download them) including this toolkit: [Neurodiversity-Affirming IEP Accommodations](#)

The Autism Education Trust has a variety of resources for teachers: [Resources to Support Autistic Children and Young People](#)

ELKLAN offer courses regarding supporting verbal Autistic children: [Courses for Practitioners: Intensive Courses](#)

### Transition

Transition into a new school environment or year group often needs extra support. The child will need:

- A key worker or mentor with the right knowledge and skills to support them. The young person must know who their keyworker is and how to ask for help from them if they are not readily available.
- Additional transition visits to become familiar with the new setting.
- Photos and instructions related to the new school/class. This may include staff, class spaces and any specific rules for the new setting.
- Information about how to get help. It is important to work towards independence - problem solving with support is part of this so the young person needs to know how to get support when they need it. There may be different levels of support e.g. looking back at instructions, asking a peer, asking a teacher, seeking out their mentor. Help them to know which strategy to use and when.
- A peer buddy if possible.
- Support for the child/young person to make a personal passport. This should contain important information that they would like other people to know about them, such as what people like and admire about me, what is important to me, how to support me.
- At secondary school it may be useful to make individual folders for each lesson containing the correct books and a full set of equipment needed so that the child only has one thing to take out of their bag.

## Supporting communication in the classroom

A range of strategies may help. Adapt them for the needs of the individual.

- **Think about the young person's position in the classroom.**
  - They may prefer to be at the front to help them focus, or at the back so that they can see everything in the room
  - Ask the person which they prefer.
- **A visual schedule to show the order of events in the day may help all learners.**
  - At secondary, use a class planner with a timetable in the back. Break this down into individual days to simplify the week.
  - If using a two-week timetable, work together to create a system that works for the individual. This may be colour coding each week differently or making lists.
- **Give visual support for task management.**
  - At primary, use pictures to break the task into smaller steps
  - At secondary age, give a written checklist. Use a wipe clean white board or wipe clean writing on the desk.
- **Agree a system for the young person to signal when they need a break, or other help, without having to use words.**
  - Accessing language is harder when the young person is becoming overwhelmed.
  - Agree a shared signal between the student and the adult, e.g. a colour-coded card, putting a ruler at the front of the desk, turning their workbook to the last page (where there might be a printed list of 'help' topics).
  - They may prefer others in the class not to know about the system.
  - Ensure they know where to go for the break and for how long.
- **Always give clear, direct, specific information:**
  - Avoid indirect, non-literal or abstract language.
  - This may include indirect requests such as '*would you like to* shut the door', idioms, sarcasm and implied statements.
  - It is difficult to avoid altogether so be aware that this may cause misunderstanding and be ready to explain more if needed.
- **Be specific when giving broad instructions:**
  - When giving an instruction such as 'tidy up', think about which tasks this involves?
  - Break it down into steps e.g. 'pick up the pens and put them in the pot', 'put the books in a pile on the top shelf.'
  - Do not give too many instructions at once – allow the child to complete each instruction before giving the next.
  - Timers may be useful (sand timers, phone timers or check for online timers).

- **Be specific about work task requirements:**
  - In maths for example, young people will often write the answer but not the working out as they will assume that people know what they have done in their head.
  - Clearly explain that they need to write it down.
  - You may need to explain why – e.g. the examiner does not know how you worked it out – you need to show them so that you can get full marks for the question.
  - You may also need to give a broader explanation – e.g. this will help you pass your exams and get the job you want.
- **Gain the child's attention before giving instructions.**
  - They may not respond to whole class instructions. Use their name so that they know you are talking to them too.
- **Give warning about what is happening next:**
  - E.g. 'in five minutes we will stop writing and get ready for feedback'.
  - Transitions between activities, lessons and breaks may need extra support.
- **Prepare the child for changes (to staff, lessons, places etc.):**
  - Change causes anxiety.
  - Explain why the change is happening as this helps with understanding.
  - E.g. if the teacher is poorly, explain this - the young person may be able to empathise.
  - Young people often make a plan to cope with new events or situations. If there is a change to one part of the plan this will impact on the whole thing.
  - If a change is necessary, help the young person to understand how to change the plan to deal with this, so they do not have to make a whole new plan themselves.
- **Break down information into smaller chunks:**
  - Even if the child understands longer more complex language, they may struggle to manage the processing load.
  - Keep instructions short and simple. Chunk information into natural pieces.
  - Leave a pause after each chunk to allow the student to process what you have said.
  - Summarise key points at suitable intervals and support this with visual information.
  - Check the young person has understood key points before moving on.
- **Slow down the speed of the interaction:**
  - Lessons can be too fast paced at times.
  - Slowing down gives everyone more processing time and gives students a chance to ask for clarification.

- **Allow extra time to answer questions:**
  - Give quiet moments for processing.
  - You may need to repeat the question, but not immediately.
  - Allow time for the young person to organise their thoughts.
  - Use whiteboards, note taking, or the think-pair-share strategy to help.
- **Agree a strategy for the young person to ask for help or show when they haven't understood:**
  - Again, they may prefer others in the class not to know that they are struggling, so this may need to be a subtle signal.
- **Use visual information to support learning:**
  - Draw diagrams, make word webs, mind maps for topics.
  - Give a photo or copy of these to help retention.
- **Prepare the young person for a new area of learning:**
  - Give additional tutoring before and after.
  - Making them aware of relevant vocabulary and links to previous areas of learning.
- **Provide a structure for learning tasks such as essays. Break it down into smaller tasks as a plan for the whole essay.**
- **Avoid asking too many direct questions:**
  - Use comments instead to reduce pressure on interaction.
  - For example, rather than saying 'what did you do today?' say, 'I went for a walk at lunchtime....' and see if the young person adds a comment of their own.
- **Equally, direct questions can help you to get the information that you need:**
  - For example, some learners may prefer you to ask, 'did you go for a walk at the weekend?' rather than 'what did you do at the weekend?'
  - You may then be able to ask further specific questions to get more information.
- **Support inference by making links explicit:**
  - Use drawing for the class group alongside speech and thought bubbles to add information to support inferential understanding.

# Supporting social communication skills

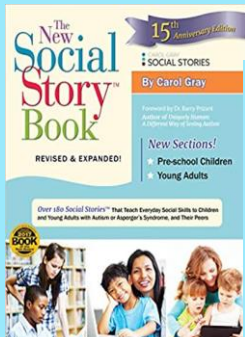
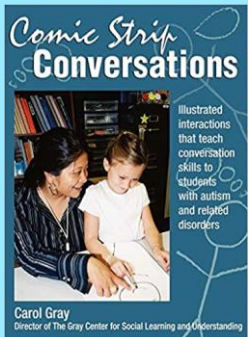
Use the following resources and strategies as part of a personalised toolkit adapted for the individual's needs.

## Strategies

- **Comic Strip Conversations™ and Social Stories™ (Carol Gray):**
  - Can be used to build awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others
  - Assess a young person's perception of a situation
  - Discuss possible future scenarios
  - Plan how it may work differently in the future
  - See books below and also this website: [Social stories and comic strip conversations \(autism.org.uk\)](https://www.autism.org.uk/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations)
- **Use of externalised social thinking:**
  - Much of our social thinking takes place internally, but adults can help young people develop skills by voicing this thinking externally, so that they can hear how the adult is analysing and responding to a situation
  - For example, "I think John is disappointed because he hasn't done very well in his test. I can tell that he's disappointed because his face has a frown and he looks like he is about to cry. I could help him by..."
  - However, be aware that some children may not like this. They may not want to hear 'your noise', just your conclusion.
- **Check understanding:**
  - Check that the young person has really understood a social situation by digging a bit deeper
  - Ask questions to clarify understanding. Don't assume knowledge
  - E.g. when asked if they are happy to attend a meeting or appointment, do they really know what that meeting involves, who will be there, what they will be required to do?
- **Be social detectives in everyday situations:**
  - Look at what is happening around you, e.g. people in the park
  - Use externalised social thinking as outlined above but also talk about predicting what a person may do next or what they might be saying to someone else
  - You could do silly versions of this to make it fun as well as sensible versions as long as the young person is aware which are silly and which are sensible.
- **Build emotional literacy:**
  - Begin by finding out what emotional vocabulary the child has and whether they can give examples of experiencing that feeling. We struggle to understand the feelings of others if we do not understand our own feelings.
  - If emotional vocabulary is limited, begin by labelling emotions in daily life as they are experienced
  - Discuss how the body feels and looks when experiencing these emotions.
  - Begin by focusing on basic emotions such as happy, sad and angry, then move on to more complex emotions such as excited, worried, surprised, anxious, frightened etc
  - Once this is established, begin to think about the emotions of others.

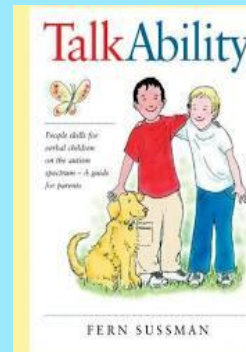
- Television programmes such as dramas and soap operas can be useful to analyse the emotions of others
- Practise looking at facial expressions, body language, gesture and tone of voice of characters, to work out their emotions
- Then apply to real life situations as they occur
- Comic Strip Conversations™ and Social Stories™ may also be useful particularly when problem solving situations involving emotions and how to change things in the future to have a different outcome.
- **Many young people are very sensitive to the emotions of others:**
  - They may pick up other people's feelings more quickly than others and can experience these emotions strongly themselves.
  - This may present as a sensitive and intuitive individual who is concerned about making sure that others are okay, but could also result in extreme emotional responses or overload in response to the emotions of others.
  - These young people may require the space and time to process the emotions that they are experiencing.
- **Lego® Therapy:**
  - can be used with a small group to collaboratively build a Lego® model.
  - It aims to develop social interaction and communication skills
  - Group members are assigned a role, builder, engineer or supplier but can be used more flexibly to enjoy a shared interest in Lego building.
  - This can be adapted to any shared interest, not just Lego®
  - See this website for more details: <https://bricks-for-autism.co.uk/about-lego-therapy/>
  - Be careful not to use Lego therapy as hidden social skills training.
- **Social skills training:**
  - Neuro-diverse young people **do not** require social skills training.
  - This encourages them to mask their differences in order to appear neuro-typical.
  - It is important to focus on perspective taking for all young people. This encourages them all to be aware of their own unique identities and perspectives.
  - It can be useful to consider the Double Empathy theory [An introduction to the double empathy problem \(youtube.com\)](#)
  - We must support young people to learn about their own identities, their communication and interaction profile, and how to advocate for themselves in a way that feels right for them.
  - If young people identify areas of their profile which they would like support with, this should be provided in an individualised way.
  - It may be useful to develop a personal profile together. This can give the young person's perspective, highlight ways that the environment and people can adapt to support the young person.

# References and resources

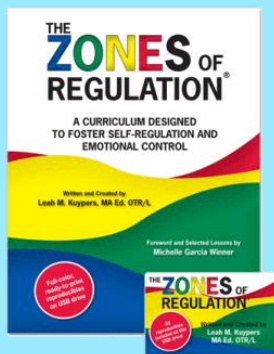


[Social Stories™](#) and [Comic Strip Conversations™](#)

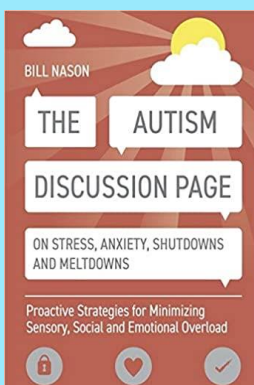
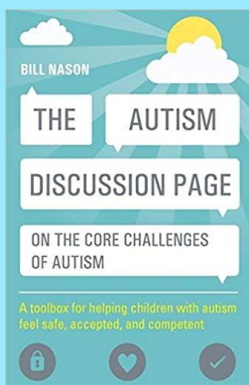
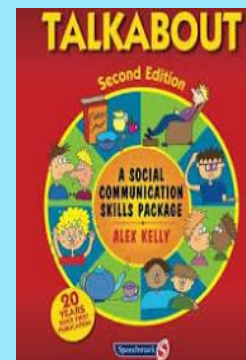
[Talkability by Hanen](#) strategies to support conversation. It includes useful tools such as social play checklists.



[Zones of Regulation](#) addresses a child's ability to regulate themselves in terms of sensory and emotional regulation. It links to the social thinking curriculum.



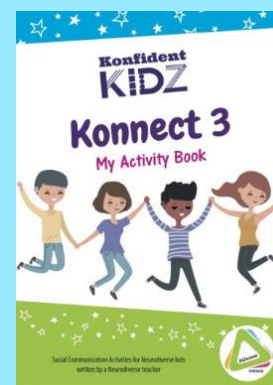
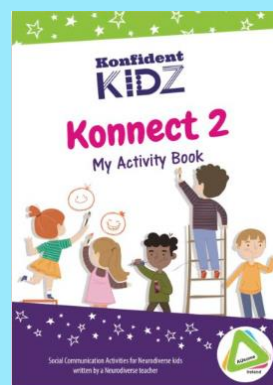
The [Talkabout](#) series has a variety of books including topics such as teenagers, transition to employment, intimate relationships, theory of mind and more. These should be used in an individualised way.



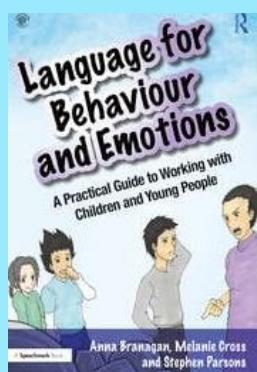
[Autism Discussion Page - Facebook](#)

This Facebook page accompanies these books and provides extracts from them.

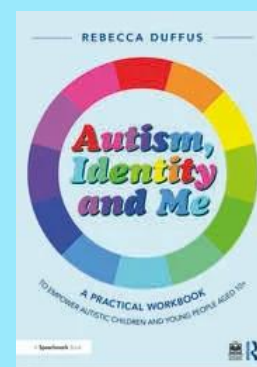
These social skills activity books from [KonfidentKids](#) are written for Autistic children by an Autistic teacher. They focus on positive self-identity and are aimed at primary school aged children.



[Language for Behaviour and Emotions - Thinking Talking](#) provides a systematic approach to developing language and emotional skills so that young people can understand and work through social interaction difficulties.



This empowering workbook [Autism Identify and Me](#) will help children and young people to develop a positive understanding of their autistic identity.



## Instagram pages

- [Autism Sketches \(@autism\\_sketches\)](#)
- [Stories About Autism \(@storiesaboutautism\)](#) – family blog by a parent to autistic children
- [Autism Family Consultant \(@school\\_run\\_mum\\_autism\)](#) – run by an SLT and parent to neurodiverse children
- [@neurowild](#) – run by an Australian-based neurodivergent parent and SLT
- [Chris Wenger - Neurodivergent Speech Therapist \(@speechdude\)](#) – run by a USA-based neurodivergent SLT
- [Reframing Autism \(@reframing\\_autism\)](#) – network run by and for Autistic people and their families
- [Autistic Girls Network \(@autisticgirlsnetwork\)](#) – charity working to improve awareness, mental health and education for autistic girls