

Asperger's Syndrome and the school science lab

We recently had an enquiry asking for advice on supporting a pupil with Asperger's Syndrome. This is a form of autism, so we contacted the National Autistic Society [1] for advice. We recommend visiting their website for details of the condition. The society could not have been more helpful and, with permission, we have reproduced their advice here. Whilst not every piece of advice will apply to an individual pupil with AS, we hope that it will help you with the special risk assessment necessary for pupils with this syndrome.

The main thing to bear in mind is the communication needs of someone with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Though the person may appear fluent in English they will probably take longer to process spoken language, so when asking a person with AS a question you need to keep sentences clear, simple, and short.

Slow delivery in a calm voice is advised.

People with an AS have a literal approach to language, so avoid figurative language or idioms. Give them time to process the language, before expecting an answer, e.g. count to 20 silently.

If you are addressing the whole class at once, the person with AS may not realise that they are included and should be listening unless you say their name to call their attention. This is because people with AS often find it difficult to tune in to what's important, especially if there are extraneous sounds around. It also may be hard for a person with AS to concentrate if they are troubled by or sensitive to noise, a common phenomenon in the condition.

In situations where you are giving instructions, it's always useful for the person with AS to have *written backup* of the instructions to refer to.

Many people with AS are visual learners, so using visual supports in the written backup and having visual notices in your lab is helpful too.

Step by step instructions are helpful as people with AS are not always aware of stages in a process that other people may pick up instinctively.



Some people with AS will ignore instructions that do not seem logical or necessary to them. This is obviously a problem when it comes to safety advice. It is difficult for people with AS to see or imagine the consequences of their actions; this is one of the characteristics of the condition. When giving an instruction like "wear eye protection", explain the possible consequences of not doing so.

Many people with AS observe rules they have been given meticulously, so where possible rules should be laid down and communicated in writing. Consider asking the pupil to indicate their agreement that they will follow a safety instruction, for example by ticking a check box. Don't be surprised if the person picks up on and reproaches others for not obeying the rules!

You will find some information on these links:

- Visual supports <http://www.autism.org.uk/24388>
- Communication <http://www.autism.org.uk/18350> (mainly for parents of children)
- Organising <http://www.autism.org.uk/31133>

We are very grateful to the National Autistic Society for their help both in dealing with the original query and with this article. ◀

Reference

[1] <http://www.autism.org.uk>