

Understanding autism

What it is, how it affects learning, and how extra tutoring can help

Autism spectrum condition (ASC or ASD) · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Autism is a lifelong **neurodevelopmental difference** in how a person communicates, relates to other people and experiences the world around them. At least **1 in 100** people are autistic, and the true figure in children is probably higher. It is **not caused** by parenting or vaccines, and it often runs in families. Autism is a spectrum, but not a scale from mild to severe: every autistic child has their own mix of strengths and difficulties. Many have average or above average ability; some also have a learning disability.

Four main areas of difference

Social communication

Taking language literally, finding the unwritten rules of conversation and friendship hard, and finding eye contact uncomfortable.

Routine and predictability

A strong need for sameness. Unexpected change, and moving from one activity to the next, can cause real distress.

Sensory differences

Being over or under sensitive to noise, light, touch, smells or tastes. Some children avoid sensations; others seek them out.

Intense interests

Deep, focused knowledge of favourite topics. This is a real strength and a powerful way into learning.

Masking

Many autistic children, girls especially, learn to copy others and hide their difficulties at school. This takes huge effort. A child who is “fine at school” may come home exhausted and have a meltdown. **That is not bad behaviour:** it is the release of a day’s worth of stress in the place they feel safe.

Meltdowns and shutdowns

A meltdown is a loss of control when overwhelmed, not a tantrum to get something. A shutdown is the quieter version: withdrawing, going silent or freezing. Both need calm and recovery time, not consequences.

Strengths worth noticing

Honesty, loyalty, attention to detail, excellent memory for facts, logical thinking, persistence and deep knowledge of the things they love.

Often found alongside

ADHD (see our sheet on autism and ADHD together), anxiety, speech and language difficulties, dyspraxia, sleep difficulties and learning disability.

A note on language

Many autistic people prefer “autistic child” to “child with autism”. Families differ, and Nicola will use whichever you and your child prefer.

How it can show at school

- Taking instructions literally: “pull your socks up” may cause confusion.
- Strong at facts and decoding, but finding inference and “why do you think...” questions hard.
- Struggling with open ended tasks such as creative writing or group work.
- Becoming exhausted by noise, crowds and constant social demands.
- Coping at school, then falling apart at home (see below).

“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

Why one to one makes a difference

A busy classroom combines almost everything autistic children find hardest: noise, unpredictability, social demands and long spoken instructions. One to one sessions at home, with you nearby, take most of that away. Your child can learn somewhere familiar, with one trusted adult, at their own pace.

What sessions look like

- **The same structure every time**, shown on a visual timetable, with a familiar start and finish.
- **Warning before any change**, and “first, then” boards to make the next step clear.
- **Clear, literal language** and time to process before an answer is expected.
- **Visual supports** such as pictures, symbols, Makaton or PECS where they help.
- **Sensory needs planned for**: lighting, noise, seating, fidget tools and movement breaks.
- **Special interests used as a way in**: maths through trains, writing about dinosaurs.
- **Explicit teaching of the hidden parts**: inference, predicting, explaining reasons, planning writing.

Trust comes first

For many autistic children the relationship is the lesson. Early sessions may be shorter and gentler while your child gets to know Nicola. Once they feel safe, learning usually moves much faster.

Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask about triggers, interests, what calms them and what upsets them. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that strategies are consistent.

Being realistic

Tutoring does not change autism, and it should not try to make your child less autistic. The aim is to build skills, confidence and understanding in a way that suits how your child thinks. It is not a substitute for the support your child is entitled to at school.

Small things that help at home

- Preview changes in advance, with pictures or a calendar where possible.
- Allow recovery time after school before any homework or questions about the day.
- Keep instructions short and literal, and give time to respond.
- Notice patterns: what happens before a meltdown is often the key.
- On hard days, reduce demands. Calm comes before learning.
- Value their interests; they are often where confidence grows.

If you are looking for a diagnosis

Talk to your GP or your child's school SENCo. Assessment is carried out by a specialist team and waiting times can be long. **Your child does not need a diagnosis to receive SEN support at school**; support should be based on need.

Where to find out more

National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk

Ambitious about Autism:
ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

NHS: nhs.uk, search “autism”

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search “SENDIASS” with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups. She uses Makaton and PECS and has completed autism awareness training.