

About this book

My personal reasons for writing it

As a teacher with over twenty years' experience working with children on the spectrum, I have extensive knowledge of how to make mistakes with pupils who have autism. This book reflects my desire to share my own professional development with others. I have often struggled to see things from a child's perspective and allow the child to teach me where and how to make changes to my practice. In this book I am sharing strategies that I, or colleagues whom I have had the privilege to work with, have used to identify the many strengths, interests and skills that children on the autism spectrum have and how to use these to overcome areas of difficulty. Sometimes I have felt overwhelmed with all the aspects of life as a teacher and when presented with a particular child's difficulty I have forgotten to simplify the problem and remember that the child is the one who holds the answer. Simplifying the problem involves asking ourselves the question 'What do we want the child to do here?'. Once we have decided what it is that we want him to do, we can then create either a new set of circumstances or a new routine to help him respond differently, or if the child is able enough we can provide him with more information about what is expected in the situation, so that hidden knowledge is exposed and he can respond in a new way. Either way, we need to help the child make sense of what is expected in order to learn effectively.

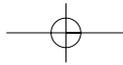
Currently, in the UK, the National Autistic Society (NAS) is campaigning to 'make school make sense' for children on the autism spectrum. They suggest that, at present, one in 110 children have autism. Consequently, the majority of teachers will teach a child on the autism spectrum at some point during their working life. The NAS is concerned that all teachers should receive appropriate training to best support the learning needs of children on the autism spectrum. They suggest that when Sencos, teachers and other professionals understand the autism spectrum, they are better equipped to make changes in their teaching styles, the curriculum and the classroom environment.

This book has been written to support school professionals in organizing and individualizing their teaching so that children who are on the autism spectrum can become independent in using a whole range of skills for life both in school and beyond it. The book does not underestimate the many difficulties school professionals face when trying to understand and plan for students who think and learn differently. However, it does aim to simplify the problem-solving process, suggest ways of celebrating the individual strengths of children on the spectrum and provide examples of where differentiation in the way teaching is delivered can really help students on the autism spectrum to learn.

Who is the book written for?

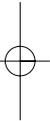
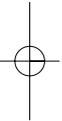
This book recognizes the importance of real collaboration and is written to support everyone involved in educational planning for children on the autism spectrum, such as

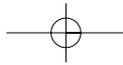




Senco's, teachers, teaching assistants (TAs), speech therapists, parents and those in positions of care or advocacy, and of course the children themselves.

Parents can be a great source of information and insight into the way a child usually responds. When teachers and teaching assistants build reciprocal trust and communication with parents, along with other professionals, a strong team is created, and no single member of that team needs to feel under stress to know *all* the answers, or always have the right strategies to draw on. This book often refers directly to 'teachers and teaching assistants' but is written to support **all** those concerned about helping children to learn.





How to use this book

The content of the book looks at how teachers and teaching assistants can make changes to their own professional skills and knowledge, as well as the classroom environment in terms of the timetable information, working systems, clear tasks and curriculum balance as well as contributing towards whole-school support systems in order that each student on the autism spectrum has an effective education programme.

The book considers examples of practice in a variety of school settings and also provides case study examples of children who are functioning at a variety of levels in terms of their cognitive abilities and their degree of autism. The reader can therefore gain a good overall understanding of autism and the issues which arise in teaching and learning across the spectrum, but can also focus and apply sections of the book which are specific to their own professional, student or setting needs.

Each chapter presents subheadings to show the key areas being covered in the chapter. Some of the main sections have interactive exercises within them to help readers consider their own thoughts, or which can be used by Sencos, or others involved in providing professional development in understanding and teaching children with autism. A brief outline of the chapters is given below.

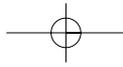
1 Interpreting autism as a triad of opportunity

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the three key areas of difficulty which define autism, known as the triad of impairment. The chapter looks at the range of responses that children present, so as to provide teachers and teaching assistants with a wider framework for understanding the spectrum. The chapter sets the scene and encourages us to see our role as a dual interpreter, firstly translating autism for colleagues and then interpreting social cues for children on the autism spectrum. It also focuses on understanding each individual child's unique presentation of autism. Readers can use the content of this chapter to consider how, by modifying their own interactions and communication when teaching, they can help children with autism to feel more relaxed and ready to learn. The chapter suggests that professionals interpret the triad of impairment as a triad of opportunity, using an understanding of autism to interact and teach more effectively.

2 The autism-friendly professional

This chapter focuses on the professionals who work with children on the autism spectrum. It looks at how a knowledge of autism, and of individual differences in the presentation of autism, can enable readers to be empathetic and insightful professionals. The chapter considers the expectations professionals have of themselves and those that students and parents may have of them. Readers can use this chapter to reflect on the roles they play in supporting and teaching children on the autism spectrum. The chapter





HELPING CHILDREN WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS TO LEARN

considers the difficulties, dilemmas and rewards of these roles and encourages us to take the opportunity to evaluate our own development as professionals who understand autism and its implications for teaching and learning. Readers can also use the chapter to reflect on the support mechanisms they may need to decrease stress and focus on enabling children on the autism spectrum to learn.

3 Making sense of changes and transitions

Everyone experiences changes occurring in their daily lives on a large or small scale. Consequently we all recognize that 'changes' can happen in a number of forms and demand different responses from us.

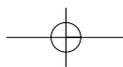
This chapter considers in depth one particular area of difficulty for children on the autism spectrum, understanding and accepting changes in daily routines and situations. This chapter considers how 'a change is only a change' if you recognize it as such and discusses the complexities of individual responses to 'change', which can cause real stress for children on the autism spectrum. Strategies are suggested for helping children to perceive change differently, or understand and accept change.

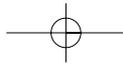
4 Structuring a meaningful classroom

'Making sense of the classroom' considers what we mean by structured teaching and how this approach can help to make the classroom make sense. It considers how teachers and teaching assistants can learn most from observing and listening to each individual about what helps him learn. Readers can use this chapter to focus on where and how they can make small adjustments to differentiate learning, clarify expectations and organize the classroom day, using timetables and working systems which the child can use to give him predictability but which teachers and teaching assistants can also use to teach flexibility and independence.

5 Behaviour; simplifying the problem-solving process

This chapter considers how some children on the autism spectrum communicate their frustrations through their behaviour. It focuses on the ways in which teachers and TAs can support themselves and other colleagues through the problem-solving process and can use simple questions to try and formulate a clear strategy for resolving challenging behaviour. The chapter considers how stress manifests itself through behaviour and how this can affect both pupils on the autism spectrum and those that work with them. The chapter suggest the use of an approach referred to as SPACE (Stress, Prevention, Action, Calming Environments and Extras) as a means of distancing both the pupil and the staff from the challenging behaviour.





6 Frequently asked questions

Chapter 6 considers some of the questions often asked by Sencos, teachers and teaching assistants in primary, secondary and special schools. Some are dealt with as generic issues, while other questions are context-specific, with particular reference to primary, secondary and special school settings. They address the needs of children who are experiencing autism at different levels of severity, and with or without additional learning difficulties. Readers can use this chapter to revisit or clarify information, focus on specific areas, or broaden their knowledge and insights by reading the questions, answers and examples which are different from their own.

How you can interact with the book

The book provides some experiential exercises that can be used to give insights into the difficulties faced by students who are on the spectrum. These experiential exercises in no way suggest that we can truly understand and feel what it is like to be on the autism spectrum. However, some exercises of this nature may help us gain insight into one or two of the areas of difficulty and provide us with renewed empathy.

The book also provides some case studies which demonstrate successful practice along with exercises which ask us to reflect upon our own practice. These exercises aim to help teachers and teaching assistants (TA's) to strengthen their observation, assessment and strategy implementation skills.

In addition, the book provides planning exercises to apply to the classroom or school situation, which may help professionals be as proactive in preventing difficulties arising as they also need to be in reacting to new challenges which a child on the autism spectrum may present.

I strongly believe that children on the autism spectrum learn most effectively from visual information. To illustrate the use of visual tools when teaching children on the autism spectrum a number of visual images, photographs, and diagrams are used in this book to support the text.

The word 'autism' literally means 'self state', which immediately tells us that anyone who has this disability will have difficulty establishing a clear concept of themselves, which in turn leads to a lack of understanding of other people. It makes sense when considering the meaning of autism that relating to others, interacting socially and a whole array of communication and thinking skills which children usually acquire are likely to be different or difficult for children who are diagnosed as on the autism spectrum.

When referring to children on the autism spectrum, this book uses the word 'spectrum' to include the full range of children who have an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). When using phrases such as 'children on the autism spectrum' the book is referring to those with mild, moderate or severe autism, children with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism (HFA) and pupils who have autism with or without learning difficulties or co-occurring difficulties. The terms 'child' and 'pupil' will be used interchangeably as appropriate and the pronoun 'he' has been selected for use rather than 'she' when generally referring to a child purely to provide continuity, ease of reading and reference. Throughout the book there are composite case studies and comments which reflect a wide range of school contexts and experience across the autism spectrum.

