

Speech and Language Therapy – Supporting individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- What is Autism?

ASD is a lifelong developmental disability that affects communication and social skills.

Autism is a ‘spectrum disorder’ as each individual with ASD will be affected in different ways and to varying degrees.

Individuals with ASD may have difficulties with social communication, social interaction and social imagination. This may mean they find it difficult to understand and use facial expression, jokes, emotions and feelings. Some individuals may have good speech and language skills whereas others may have more difficulties in these areas.

ASD also includes Asperger Syndrome; Individuals with Asperger Syndrome are of average or above average intelligence and generally have fewer difficulties with speaking.

- How can Speech and Language Therapy help?

Whilst there is no known cure for ASD, Speech and Language Therapists can support and develop the client’s speech and language skills. Therapists are able to assess client’s speech and language strengths and difficulties, they can then design and implement a therapy plan that will enable the child to fulfil and maintain their communication potential.

Whilst working with the client on a 1:1 basis and on some occasions in a group setting, the therapist will also need to spend some time with the family and school/college to ensure they know how to support and develop the child’s social communication, interaction and imagination skills. The Therapist will discuss and use techniques and resources that allow the client to make choices, express their feelings, learn skills and increase their independence. Visual strategies are often used to support these aspects of speech and language.

- **What is involved in the assessment?**

To begin with, the Speech and Language Therapist will take a case history. A case history is a number of questions, sometimes the parents may not know all of the answers to the questions; this is fine, the Therapist will provide support as required when answering these. The Therapist will wish to know about the things that motivate the client, as well as the things that do not, as this may help to engage the client in the assessment.

The assessment will aim to establish the client's speech, language and communication strengths and difficulties. The assessment will take place informally through play activities and formally through assessment books if the child is happy to do so. The Therapist may also wish to observe the child.

During the assessment, the Therapist will be able to rule out any other factors such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and anxiety.

Assessments usually take two hours but this is dependent on the areas that the therapist wishes to assess and on how engaged the client is with the assessment. Children usually enjoy the activities that they do with our Therapists but they will not be pressured to engage with the activities if they do not wish to do so.

- **What might happen in therapy?**

The Therapist may provide the family/school with a list of personalised communication strategies that would be useful when communicating with the child.

The Therapist may implement a Speech and Language therapy programme for the parents/school to follow. The therapist would model all aspects of the programme to the parents/school and would be able to provide support as necessary.

The Therapist may introduce a picture symbol system or Makaton to help the client to communicate more effectively.

These are just a few of the interventions that may be suggested, the Therapist will need to analyse the initial assessment findings in order to recommend the type of therapy that is most suitable.