

AUTISM

Autism is a condition which affects communication skills. 20 – 30% of all people with autism do not have an intellectual disability BUT all will have learning difficulties.

Autism affects more males than females 4 males to 1 female.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. Children and adults with autism are unable to relate to others in a meaningful way. Their ability to develop friendships is impaired as is their capacity to understand other peoples feelings.

People with autism often have accompanying learning disabilities but everyone with the condition shares a difficulty in making sense of the world.

Reality to an autistic person is a confusing interacting mass of events, people places sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything.

- -A person with autism.

What causes autism.

The exact cause or causes of autism is/are still not known but research shows that genetic factors are important. It is also evident from research that autism is associated with a variety of conditions affecting brain development which occur before during or very soon after birth.

For those who are autistic and have an intellectual disability the degree of that disability will vary from mild to profound.

Aspergers syndrome – is a mild high functioning type of autism there are 11 males to 1 female. People with Aspergers often have very high IQ's eg. Bill Gates of Microsoft. They can appear to be eccentric, the mad professor-genius but crazy!

Some people are described as having autistic tendencies. This means they will exhibit some but not all the symptoms.
It is a very complex disorder.

Autistic people can have enormous difficulty interacting with other people and can appear aloof, or may be passive- which means if led they will interact but they are not understanding what it is all about! Sometimes they will interact in an active way but their behaviour is very odd.

Autistic people often have a total absence of any desire to communicate with others. They are locked into a safe little world of their own –they may want to come out but have no idea how to!

Some are echolaliac this means they will repeat back exactly what is said to them without comprehending the meaning. Also they may copy actions. As well as echolalia some may have repetitive speech this means they may constantly repeat a word just because they like the sound of it, possibly not understanding its meaning at all and it can be totally unconnected to anything that you are trying to talk about.

Communication is often confined to an expression of their own needs.

They may make factual comments that are totally irrelevant to the social situation or may talk incessantly, regardless of any response of others. They often do not have the ability to have a two way conversation.

People with autism can display a distortion of the rules of language, eg pull your socks up, they may physically bend down and actually pull up their socks! So when we say – run up your stirrups and there is no response they may be trying to work out how they can – physically run up the stirrups!!

Sometimes when talking they may not put any intonation into the conversation and speak in a flat monotone or equally it can be the opposite and put in far too much and only converse in a sing – song voice and expect you to reply in the same tone.

They can have great difficulty in understanding that other people may see things from a different point of view to them. Also they have very poor sequencing of events- great difficulty in understanding – what happens next so they may rely on their own particular obsessive behaviour eg rock or flap this is their way of coping with the situation it is safe! It is a way of dealing with their anxiety in a way they understand.

If an autistic person hurts you or the horse they will have no concept of how you – or the horse feels so you must deal with that situation in a totally unemotional way and not say – how would you like it.

They are often very inflexible :- they learn one way to behave and will behave in exactly the same way in every situation or just repetitively enact a role which has been copied without understanding the purpose behind the actions.

They can often have a weakness in processing words in which case you need to use more visual instructions.

When instructing autistic riders, cut down on the number of words used. Use vital words only, always use the riders name so that they realise that you are talking to them.

Sometimes you need to shut up completely to give time and space to the rider they may need quite a lot of time to process what has already been said.

DO NOT –let the helpers chat amongst themselves this can cause an autistic rider great anxiety and only talk about what we are doing.

Eye contact may be very difficult as they do not naturally learn it- may be just a fleeting glance also they do not read facial expressions or body language.

They can be very sensitive to smells some will not like perfume or if they smell something like lemon soap they may want to eat it as it smells so good!

Some have what is called Picca which means that they will try to eat inedible things or some may lick objects including the horse!

Visually they may focus on one particular thing or may dislike a particular colour eg will not ride a brown horse.

They often totally lack any imagination. You need a positive approach when teaching Autistic riders but also it needs to be low arousal so do not shout, also if you are too enthusiastic this can cause high arousal. You need to have lots of empathy which they lack. Do not give too much choice be direct in your approach and be consistent as they do not like or cope very well with change. Wherever possible have the same pony leader etc as the previous week changes can cause great anxiety. May find games hard to cope with.

Unsociable Behaviour.

Autistic children can have very unsociable behaviour which can include the following.

Screaming and shouting in public.

Taking off their clothes in public.

Touching a strangers clothes and possessions.

Always telling the truth eg Look at her isn't she ugly.

Use swear words in public, because they have no understanding of what they are saying.

Social naivety resulting in inappropriate friendly behaviour to a complete stranger.

Special Skills.

They may play a musical instrument particularly well.

May be able to compose music.

May be able to perform lengthy numerical calculations.

May read fluently at a very young age (although comprehension is poor)

May be able to predict the day of the week, any date, that did or will fall over a wide span of years.

They may be able to memorise huge quantities of facts on a favourite subject.

May be able to assemble mechanical or constructional toys or apparatus.

May be clever with computers.

May have an outstanding artistic skill (usually something they have seen)

SO TO SUM UP

The characteristics of Autism.

All people with Autism have impairments in social interaction, social communication and imagination. This is referred to as the Triad of impairments.

- social interaction- difficulty with social relationships appearing aloof and indifferent to other people.
- social communication- difficulty with verbal and non verbal communication eg not really understanding the meaning of gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice.
- imagination – difficulty in the development of play and imagination eg having a limited range of imaginative activities, possibly copied and pursued rigidly and repetitively.

In addition to this triad repetitive behaviour patterns are a notable feature and a resistance to change in routine.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is very complex and everyone with the disorder has individual difficulties it is impossible to generalise but I hope some of this information will help you to understand your Autistic riders a little better.