

Social and Communication Difficulties on AOS Spectrum

Social and communication difficulties

This booklet will explain what social and communication difficulties are and give examples of the sort of problems all these different children might have.

You can't tell that someone has social and communication difficulties by the way that they look, but you may recognise someone you know through the problems that are described in this booklet.

Children with social and communication difficulties have problems with getting on with other people and understanding what other people mean.

What are social difficulties?

Children with social difficulties may have difficulty with:-

- Getting on with other people, making and keeping friends and joining in with groups of children.
- Taking turns – this might be taking turns in a game, or it could be two people taking turns to say things to each other, as you do in a conversation.
- Knowing when to look you in the eyes, which is something most of us know how to do without thinking when we talk to each other. This is called “eye contact”. When people look away it can be hard for us to be sure whether or not they are listening.
- Empathy – understanding what other people are thinking or feeling. Not being able to see things from someone else's point of view.

So children with social difficulties may sometimes seem selfish or uncaring, or they may say or do things that are out of place. For example, they may talk in a very loud voice to someone standing close to them or keep talking about an interest of theirs; to someone they don't know, talk rudely about someone's appearance or yawn widely when someone else is talking.

Try holding a conversation with one of your friends who deliberately looks away or speaks out of turn. See how much you do without thinking about it!

What are communication difficulties?

Communication is not just about what people say to each other with words. It's also about the meanings people put into their faces, their tone of voice and the movements they make with their bodies to help explain things to others. So communication is about using all these things as well as words.

- Children with communication difficulties may find it hard to understand some of the things you say and you may find that you have to simplify some of your conversations with them. You may have to repeat yourself.
- What they say may not always make sense to you either.

- They may find it difficult to put their thoughts into words, or they may not always give you enough information for you to follow what they are talking about. At other times though, they may say too much!
- They may find it hard to understand the meaning you put into your voice (for example the “tone” of your voice).
- They may find it difficult to put meaning into their own voices too.
- They may find it difficult to understand the messages we give to each other without speaking – our body messages, like the expressions we have on our faces, or when we make gestures like waving, pointing or shrugging our shoulders. They may find it hard to give their own body messages too.
- Children with communication difficulties may need help at school because of these problems, so that they can concentrate and learn better. They will need help and understanding from both their teachers and their peers.

Try saying the same thing in different “tones of voice”. See how different they sound to you.

Make a brief guide to five different “body language” messages. You and a friend take it in turns to demonstrate a “message” while the other one tries to explain it in words.

There’s a lot you can say without talking!

Are Social and Communication difficulties catching?

No. It is not an illness like measles and it is not catching. It is not anyone’s fault.

Is it to do with the brain?

It seems that the brain of some children with social and communication difficulties might work in a slightly different way from other people’s brains. Just because some

Children’s brains may work slightly differently from other people’s this does not mean that they are stupid. Far from it! They may be very good at drawing, computing, remembering things, spelling, collecting or something else. Some children with social and communication difficulties are very clever.

Why does he or she want to be alone a lot?

Children who don’t find social and communication skills easy have difficulties that can be hard for them to put up with sometimes. They may need their own space to relax. They may also have interests that don’t include other people and be happy doing these for a long time. It doesn’t mean they never want to be with other people – it just means they may need more space and time to themselves than others does.

Why doesn’t he or she get told off like I do?

It may appear that there are different rules for children with social and communication difficulties. They may be allowed to do things that you would not be allowed to do. This is because teachers know that it is often because of the child’s problem that he or she may say and do the “wrong thing”. They also know that it is frightening and stressful to have these difficulties.

Teachers and helpers may tell these children off in different ways too. They may get cross and raise their voice to tell other children off, but they may think that this doesn’t work with the child with difficulties. Teachers might instead try to explain quietly to the child so that he

or she will understand. This doesn't feel fair sometimes, but it is part of an unfair situation where one person has a difficulty and the others don't.

We can't all be treated in exactly the same way, because we all have different abilities and needs. You are likely to be more responsible and more understanding than a child with difficulties and your teachers know that.

Why does he or she laugh when I'm upset?

Children with social and communication difficulties find it hard to understand other people's feelings. It is difficult for them to see things from other people's points of view. So when someone gets upset they may find this confusing and don't know how to behave. It doesn't mean that they want to hurt them. It may seem like that, and it may be hard not to feel hurt sometimes. Try and remind yourself that it happens because of their problems with empathy. If you try and see the point of

view of a person with social and communication difficulties you will be using empathy yourself – and you will realise that not having empathy is a very serious problem.

Why does he or she ignore me sometimes?

Different people have different answers for this question. Here are some examples:-

- "He doesn't realise that it's rude to ignore people because he can't see their point of view"
- "Other things catch her attention and she thinks about these rather than listening to me"
- "His obsessions stop him thinking about anything else"
- "She finds having conversations hard work sometimes, so she might "switch off" to shut out any talking"
- "Sometimes he doesn't realise I am talking to him as he doesn't read the signs in my face and body that show who I am talking to"

Why does he or she physically hurt people sometimes?

Children with social and communication difficulties can become very frustrated when they do not understand situations. Sometimes they may hit out. Some children with social and communication difficulties have difficulty understanding what other people are feeling. They may not understand that they hurt other people (or how much they hurt other people) when they hit them.

Why is he or she in our school and not a special one?

We know that children with social and communication difficulties will find some things hard, but this does not mean that they will have problems with their work (in fact some are very clever). It is important that such children come to your school so that they can do the right level of work.

Children with social and communication difficulties can learn a lot from being with children without these difficulties. They can learn a lot and benefit a lot from being with you. You will also learn some things from them.

Why does he or she name call or try to wind me up?

Children with social and communication difficulties may have problems understanding what you are thinking and how you feel. They may not understand how hurtful the things they say to you are, but they see that they get you excited so they keep on saying them.

What is it like for children with social and communication difficulties?

These are some ways some peers have described children they knew:-

- “He finds things confusing sometimes.”
- “She finds it frustrating.”
- “He finds it hard to have conversations and made friends.”
- “She doesn’t always know, like we do, how we should behave.”
- “He wants to be friendly, but the only way he knows how is to talk about something that he’s interested in.”

Can you think of other comments?

What can you do to help?

It would help if you and your friends:-

- encourage him/her to join in
- start a conversation with him/her
- ask different questions
- are patient
- let him/her see that you’re “friendly”
- forgive him/her quickly when s/he says or does something unkind, understanding that s/he may not understand what s/he has done wrong

Can you think of any others?