

# Helping Parents and Teachers of young people with autistic spectrum conditions during exam time

Over half a million people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over two million people who lives are touched by autism every single day.

Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. Which means that many of these two million people get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need.

Together, we are going to change this.

Exams are a time of anxiety for all students but especially those with an autism spectrum condition (ASC). However there is plenty that parents and teachers can do to help.

### Difficulties for students with ASC in exams

Many students with an ASC are academically able, but will have difficulties with exams because:

- They feel anxious
- They do not understand why they need to sit an exam
- They do not understand the exam questions
- They have sensory issues and may not cope well with, for example, a large exam hall
- They have difficulty staying 'on task'.

## Anxiety

Many people with an ASC rely on structure and routine to cope in an unpredictable world. Exams, which are new and different and mean a change in routine, can cause great anxiety. It helps if teachers can explain when exams will take place, how students will be preparing for them and what happens on the day.

Similarly unstructured time such as study leave can be difficult

It is also worth mentioning that students with an ASC can be very hard on themselves and unrealistic about their performance, as well as worrying about results.

## Motivation

Sometimes students with an ASC cannot see the point in sitting an exam. They know that they have the knowledge but cannot understand why they have to put it on paper.

Teachers can help by explaining the point behind exams. For example, having qualifications shows other people like employers that you have knowledge of certain subjects and are good at things.

## Understanding exam questions

James was a student with an ASC. In a school English exam a question read, 'Can you describe the main characteristics of Macbeth's personality? James simply answered 'Yes', because he could.

People with an ASC can take things literally, and may not understand open-ended questions.

If we take the exam question above as an example, James was unable to infer from it that he should write about Macbeth. The question may have been better phrased like this: 'Describe the main characteristics of Macbeth's personality.' It might also help to say how much students should write, for example between 400-500 words.

If you are setting tests in school, you could look at how questions are phrased. Are they likely to be understood by students with an ASC?

Before students sit external exams, it will help to look at past exam questions and discuss how they would answer them. Are they interpreting the question correctly?

### **Sensory issues**

Students with an ASC often feel overwhelmed by the size and unfamiliarity of big exam halls. Strip lighting, noise (even background noises that most of us can filter out), smells, a teacher walking up and down, all these can be a distraction. Check if students would prefer a small room away from distractions.

### **Staying on task**

It can be difficult for students with an ASC to understand what they need to do in order to finish an exam in time.

They may also need extra time to process instructions, or to read and understand exam questions. Support teachers can stay with students to prompt them for time-keeping and help them to stay on task.

### **Motor skills difficulties**

Many students with an ASC have motor skills difficulties, which means their handwriting might be difficult to read. Consider if some students can use a computer in exams.

### **Special interests**

Special interests are important to many people with an ASC, to the extent that they can become obsessions. In an exam, some students could try to bring their special interests into their answers, whether it is relevant or not. They need to be discouraged from doing this most of the time.

However, occasionally it helps to talk about a special interest. One exam question was about television families and what the programme teaches us about their lives. A student with an ASC was able to put his extensive knowledge of The Simpsons to good use.

## Revision and Study leave

Students with an ASC may find unstructured time difficult. This is because they may not know how to plan their time, or their learning style isn't suited to traditional ways of revising.

Below are some ways parents and teachers can help.

### Learning styles

Students have different learning styles and it helps to consider when planning these revision sessions. Some might learn best by hearing or watching revision material, rather than reading it; others do better when studying at certain times of the day, or in a group rather than on their own. Many people find memory aids, such as flash cards, helpful.

There are all sorts of ways for students to revise, some of which maybe worth investigating. These include revision clubs, using the school library, practise with past papers and revision guides.

## Preparing for exams

Exams mean a change to routine and a step into the unknown, which isn't always easy for students with an ASC. There are some simple things that parents and teachers can do to prepare students for exams and reduce stress and anxiety.

### Which exams should students take?

Teachers can help students with an ASC by considering carefully what courses and exams they will take.

Withdrawal from a course or an exam can be problematic, so it is important to be sure of your assessment.

## Exams

Some students with an ASC need to be stretched and can take a lot of exams, while others won't manage as many.

If you don't think that students will be ready to take exams in all subjects, encourage them to concentrate on the ones that they are truly interested in. Maybe opt for modular courses where possible.

Some students with an ASC have hyperlexia: they read very well but don't necessarily attach the appropriate meaning to the text. This can give you an exaggerated impression of students' abilities.

## **Support from teachers**

Once you know what courses students are taking, you could:

- Draw up a weekly student plan which you give to students at the start of the course so they can see what they will be learning and how they will prepare for the exams.
- Draw up a timetable showing when exams are taking place, keep it on display in your classroom.
- Talk about how you'll be preparing for the exams at school, for example revision lessons and practise with past exam paper.
- For the last two to three weeks of a course, do practise papers and concentrate on exam technique.
- Talk about what happens during exams.
- Try to see students at the start of each exam: seeing a familiar face at this time can be comforting.

## **Support from parents**

Here are some ways in which you can help your child prepare for an exam.

- Teach your child simple relaxation techniques such as taking five deep breaths before entering the exam room.
- Talk to the school about relaxation so that your child can be reminded to use relaxation techniques at the right time.
- Keep items relating to special interests at home as these might distract your child if taken into an exam room.
- If it helps, play relaxing music in the house before your child leaves for an exam.
- Encourage your child to get out and about, physical activity can reduce anxiety.
- Make sure your child has a good meal before the exam.
- Try to make yourself available during exam times to offer support or talk about your child's concerns.
- Make sure your child has an exam timetable to hand, perhaps put one in the kitchen or their bedroom.
- Try writing a social story about exams. These are short stories, often with pictures, that tell your child why they are taking an exam, or what they can expect to happen on the day.

## Special arrangements for exams

Schools can make their own arrangements for students with an ASC in internal exams. However, for external exams like GCSEs they must ask for special arrangements to be put in place, if necessary.

Schools have to show that students need special arrangements. For example, students may first have been tested by a specialist teacher or an educational psychologist to determine which arrangements may be appropriate for them.

The special arrangements you can ask for include:

- Students to have extra time to complete task
- Students to sit exams in smaller rooms
- Students to sit exams in smaller groups or alone
- Students to get exam papers in different formats, such as digital
- Support teachers to act as prompts to keep students on task.

These arrangements are offered to all students with a special educational need which includes ASC but must be requested from exam boards. There may be deadlines involved for such requests.

It is wise to put special arrangements in place for internal exams if staffing and resources allow, so that:

Students with ASC are familiar with the arrangements and more likely to benefit from them when taking external exams.

This presentation was put together using information from



Accept difference. Not indifference.

On there website you can find  
some example of social stories  
and exam timetables.

If you have any questions please contact either Mrs S Shultz or Miss  
Parkinson on 01772 513002