

Autism and Safeguarding - by Ann Memmott
An Adviser to the Church of England and to the Government APPG on Autism
Ann is on the autism spectrum
Quick notes

Autism: Brain design difference affecting people of any age, background and IQ

Basics:

Huge need for routine/predictability

Social clumsiness and naivety

Sensory processing difficulties (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, balance, sense of distance, heat, cold).

Affects around 750,000 people in the UK, from birth.

Usually immensely kind, gentle, caring people who make excellent friends. Amazing specialised abilities are common: persistence and dedication pays off. It's not the same as having a learning difficulty, though some do. It's not mostly boys. It's nothing to do with being badly behaved or criminal, though a tiny number may be persuaded to commit a criminal act by someone who assures them that "this is allowed". Naivety is behind most of such instances. Most are immensely law-abiding, logical and straightforward. Some are members of clergy or in other positions in our churches already.

Safeguarding Considerations:

Occasionally, behaviour can be misinterpreted. The list below contains the common things that can cause misunderstandings. They will be rare and will not all be present in one person. It is just for reference. Generalising throughout – but these are the key things that may impact on safeguarding. Always ask what would help someone. Ask for advice if something isn't clear.

1. Brain takes in too much information from the senses, so after hours of social interaction or crowded noisy places, the brain wiring overheats (literally) and causes physical pain. **It may cause an 'epileptic fit' which will resemble a tantrum, perhaps with lots of swearing, or a sudden shutdown of communication.** Neither is an attempt at deliberate aggression or manipulation. There is a need to get to somewhere quiet to let the brain wiring cool down. Think of a combination of Tourettes and Epilepsy and don't try to reason someone out of it or go to touch them – it will hurt the brain wiring even more and make it worse. The knack is to get them to a quiet safe space and let them just 'be' until the brain cools. It can help

to let them wrap themselves in a blanket or coat, as this has a calming effect on the sensory system. Most of us (including me) just find they cannot talk, which is unspectacular, but a safety consideration if they cannot reason with people to safeguard ourselves.

2. Lack of ability to maintain personal space – cannot see where people are. **May stand too close. May make physical contact to find out where the person is** – it's similar to a Blind person reaching out to find out where someone is. If so, it's not a sexual threat or an attempt to hit. A simple rule of standing an arms-reach away from someone is a good one to teach.
3. Brain lacks a 'people-interpreting centre', so cannot see body language, face expressions, eye contact signals nor hear tone of voice in a meaningful way – **misinterpretations aplenty about mood** unless people use clear language to explain mood and intent. Can appear to be sullen and 'blank', but this does not mean that they are emotionless. It is just very difficult for those on the autism spectrum to use the body language and voice tone to express the moods they feel inside. It's easy for people to misinterpret their lack of body language as threatening or angry.
4. Utterly logical, literal, truthful. Expects others to be the same. **Will believe what they are told, without question.** Even as an adult with an otherwise high IQ. Intense vulnerability to predators results. Instructions have to be explicit, not implicit. Do not assume that someone with autism will 'just know' that something is allowed or disallowed. An example would be contacting young people on Facebook; is it clear in policies that adults are not to have younger Facebook Friends from church without it being carefully thought through and openly monitored?
5. Fear is the primary emotion. Unfortunately because of the body language difficulties and voice tone difficulties, it can be misinterpreted as anger. 8 out of 10 people with autism have been severely bullied. Bullying will cause intense levels of fear and cannot be easily overcome by reason and skill. **Protecting those with autism from bullies is absolutely vital.** The vast majority of people with autism are victims of crime, not criminals.
6. Ability to use language is not at the same level as the ability to understand and interpret language, particularly social language and spiritual concepts. Can sound 'little Professor-ish' but may struggle to fully understand complex sentences and non-visual concepts. Very 'visual thinkers', so will think in pictures, not in words. **May misinterpret instructions.** It can help to repeat instructions, break them down into simple steps, or use visual cues. Ask what would help, rather than assume malevolent intent if safeguarding instructions are not followed.

7. Brain stores information on possessions in the bit of the brain that normally deals with care and love for people. **Thus if someone breaks their things, it triggers the brain to feel the same emotional intensity as if someone had broken the leg of their baby.** It can seem unwarranted and be misinterpreted as troublemaking. It's not. Think through consequences for allowing others in a group to touch, move or break the personal possessions of someone with autism, and avoid it if possible.
8. **Jostling causes intense physical pain in many on the autism spectrum.** A slight touch going past someone can feel like being hit – so may cause an extreme reaction that seems out of proportion. It isn't. The pain is very real. Be aware of this. Bullies soon learn that light touch hurts – and can cause intense fear through this means.
9. There isn't enough Oxytocin chemical in their bodies. It's the "cuddle chemical" that regulates calmness and social bonding with those in the family/friends unit around them. It's made by cuddling, massage, stroking, etc. It's apparently why children with autism who are brought up with family pets (cat, dog) are shown to have better social skills – stroking a pet helps produce the missing chemical. **But for example a teenage lad stroking a person or cuddling someone might be misinterpreted as sexual aggression. It probably isn't.** Such behaviour can be guided with rules and by finding a more appropriate way to boost that chemical level (cuddling a soft toy/consensual hug from a safe known friend of that person etc).
10. Intense interest in specialist subject and in particular friends. This is how those with autism learn about people and how to interpret them. **The level of intensity can occasionally be misinterpreted as stalking behaviour. It isn't.** It can be controlled with firm rules being taught. Because of the extreme honesty, those with autism may say inappropriate things like "I love you" to someone, causing embarrassment. Again, it's easy to misinterpret this as a sexual threat of some kind, but it can be a way to express Christian love. It's clumsiness and social naivety, not aggression and power-play. It's normal for someone with autism to have a social age that is greatly younger than their actual age. Whilst respecting their adult rights, it's important not to assume adult intent to harm. Interpret it first as clumsiness of response, guide them clearly and seek expert help if that doesn't work.
11. Spiritual literalism and spiritual abuse: Beware sloppy thinking about theology from church and group leaders. It is not helpful for someone with autism to be told that they cannot worship alongside others because people don't want to have their worship affected by their presence. It is spiritual abuse for them to be told that they are not really people and don't have a soul, therefore aren't worth teaching. It is not helpful for clergy to refuse to help interpret the language in the Bible and liturgy,

claiming it's too much trouble. Those on the autism spectrum have every bit as much need for safe, quality, accessible faith experiences as everyone else. Good ideas for materials are available via Ann.

More advice and information readily and freely available from Ann or via the Safeguarding teams.

Ann.memmott@oxford.anglican.org