

Meet Amber



She is full of curiosity and energy
She can remember everything
She is passionate about her interests
She can light up the room with a smile

But Amber can't always understand how
to act in social situations.

Autism and coronavirus

We have adapted our guide to learning difficulties to take account of coronavirus. Find out new ways to support Amber in the current crisis.

Understanding Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition - which means that it is part of the make-up of the brain. People refer to autism in different ways, and you might see it called Autism Spectrum Disorder or Condition (ASD or ASC). Asperger syndrome is a diagnosis that has been given in the past to autistic people who do not have a learning disability, though this term is no longer often used.

About 1 in 100 people are thought to be on the autistic spectrum. Autism is more commonly diagnosed in males, though it is increasingly recognised that there are more females on the autism spectrum than previously thought.

Autism is a spectrum condition, which means that the variation between individuals is huge, though there are key similarities. The core challenge for all is in making sense of the world. The main areas of difficulty are social interaction, communication, flexibility of thought and behaviour, and sensory processing. The degree to which these difficulties impact on day-to-day life can range enormously from person to person, in different settings and across the life span.

People on the autism spectrum often find changes difficult to manage and may become fixated on certain objects or actions. Some will use alternative communication systems, for example signs or pictures. Many autistic individuals are over or under sensitive to touch, taste, smell, sound, light, temperature or pain.

Autism: strengths and challenges

Amber benefits from a reliable daily routine. She is likely to be at her best in safe, familiar surroundings and to find sudden changes challenging.

Amber is best suited to tasks where her attention to detail is a real asset. She can work accurately and will deliver consistently good performance on tasks which match her skill level. For her, quality rather than quantity is the driving force during her day.

Quiet environments with few distractions are where Amber can maximise her strengths. She is a good and loyal friend, but she will almost certainly have difficulties with social interaction and she is unlikely to feel at her best in situations that rely heavily on social or communication skills.

Amber may struggle to explain when a problem arises, so it would be good to check in with her regularly to let her raise any issues.

In the coronavirus crisis, children and young people with autism may:

- Feel especially anxious because of changes to routine and new uncertainties about the future
- Be aware of the news, but be unable to process everything they hear, leading to a lot of confusion and maybe exhaustion
- Become over-fixated on hand-washing and cleanliness
- Find it very hard to adapt to learning at home
- Miss their peers at school, and need support to maintain those relationships

Here are a few ways we can all support Amber during the coronavirus crisis and lockdown:

General

- Communicate clearly and speak literally
 - Find a simple way to explain concepts like 'social distancing' and stick to your explanation
 - Help Amber understand how flexible the new rules are, by explaining the underlying reasons that they have been introduced
- Keep routines consistent
 - Routines don't need to mirror the school day, find the routine that works best for Amber, and for you
 - Try to settle on a routine and stick to it so this can become your 'new normal'
- Give ample warning and explanation of changes

At home

- Use visual cues to help communication
- Tell her what she should do, not what she shouldn't do
- Help her to make charts and write lists
- Identify stress triggers and try to work around them

When you help Amber to keep learning at home, think about these general tips for schools and see if you can also do these things:

At school

- Provide a predictable environment
- Be clear about learning time rules
- To explain harder tasks, use lists, cards or pictures

At the hospital

- The hospital might have some different processes than usual, find these out in advance if you can
- Be aware that Amber may be over (hyper) or under (hypo) sensitive to touch, pain, smells and sounds
- Explain any medical procedures very clearly
- Try to ensure that Amber sees the same staff regularly
- Consider the best time of day for an appointment
- Make waiting times as short as possible



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