



# Leader Support Guide

## Autism and Asperger Syndrome

Autism and Asperger Syndrome are just two disorders within the range of Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

Autism is a developmental condition which can occur at any time in a child's early years of development - often when another child in the family is born. You cannot tell an individual has Autism by looking at them. It upsets the way the brain uses the information it receives and this results in problems with communication.

There are a number of other medical terms used to describe the condition, and sometimes it exists as part of another disorder.

Autism is not infectious and others cannot catch it by contact or association!

Asperger Syndrome is a term usually used for those disorder sufferers who are more able, and have better language development. Individuals may be more willing to make social contacts but this may be done in ways that are naive and inappropriate.

### **Living with Autism**

At the moment, no one knows the cause and there is no known cure, but different ways of working with an individual with Autism can make the condition worse or better. People with Autism have difficulty in making human contact, particularly eye contact. They also have a tendency to fix on inanimate objects.

An individual with Autism may swing from being excessively loud and noisy to very quiet and withdrawn. They may kick, punch and pinch others out of frustration for no apparent reason.

Some individuals can be very gifted at drawing or playing a musical instrument but may find it difficult to do anything that requires social interaction.

Communication and language problems are some of the main difficulties encountered, which can affect meaningful speech, reading, writing or sign language.

Often an individual with Autism will repeat back sounds or conversations which cannot only be annoying to the speaker but also give the impression that they have understood more than they actually have.

The individual may have difficulty in knowing when to interrupt or when not to call out, laugh or shout.

A family may find that a child with Autism has a very different sleep pattern to their other children - perhaps always waking at 5am and being wide awake and wanting to do something.

### **Practical tips**

Leaders need to be thoroughly acquainted with the individual and their parents. It is important to establish a level of trust which will allow the problems to be openly discussed.

Keep instructions simple and do not assume they have been understood. You may have to help in a game until the individual starts to understand what is going on.

An individual with Autism will often copy others, so if you shout they may shout more. Other young people may start copying the noises made and this will only make the problem worse.

Talk to the parents, they are a valuable source of do's and don'ts, also to see if there are any activities that you may use to help quieten an individual down if they are over excited. This might be drawing, cutting out, doing a jigsaw or even washing up!

### **What else do I need to know?**

There is no reason why an individual with Autism cannot join a Scout Group, the range of activities and experiences offered may help them to reach their full potential.

Leaders must be aware that it may make a difference to the way they run their activities. An essential step is to have a full and honest discussion with the parents to identify all the issues before you start.

It is worth discussing the normal pattern at home to find out how long the individual sleeps. If they only sleep six hours remember that if they go to bed at 10.30pm they may be wide awake and wanting to run around the campsite at 4.30am.

Find out if there are any special routines in use at home and/or school with which you could link. You may find that life is very ordered, or there is a special way to give instructions such as "First we wash then we change for bed".

An individual with Autism like many young people, may wander off from a Scouting activity. There are however a couple of problems to be aware of:

- If their communication is poor they will not be able to ask for the way back if they get lost.
- They may not remember basic safety rules such as how to cross the road.
- A discussion with the parent will identify this problem at home, so at least you are prepared.
- At camp you may wish to explain to anyone camping nearby that if they see the individual wandering around - can they bring him/her back to you.
- Some individuals with Autism may carry some identification explaining their condition when they are out so that if they get lost anyone finding them would know where or who to contact.

As with many children there may be no sense of danger. However, explaining dangers does not mean necessarily that they have understood them, so you may need to watch them carefully.

### **Further Information**

Discuss with the parents the extent to which help is needed and learn any practical tips they have to offer. They may also be able to arrange a chat with their teacher or others helping them.

Information on these conditions can be found in the following Leader Support Guides  
Leader Support Guide LSG7 – Challenging Behaviour  
Leader Support Guide LSG8 - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD or ADD) –  
Leader Support Guide LSG10 - Hyperactivity  
[www.nsw.scouts.com.au](http://www.nsw.scouts.com.au) then look for Support Guides in the Leaders section.

Further General information: Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) [www.autismnsw.com.au/](http://www.autismnsw.com.au/)

### **SPECIAL NOTE**

Illness, disorder and behavioural problems require skilled diagnosis. The treatment is then determined in accordance to the type of the particular disorder and needs of the patient.

This Guide is designed to give you a basic understanding of the problem,

The Guardian/parent will know the various idiosyncrasies of their child's problems. How to identify the need for intervention and what steps they require you to take to assist their child, as mentioned above, it is essential to talk to the parents.

It can also be a wonderful training in life's skills if the guardian/parent, with the child's permission, can give a brief talk to your Section and indicate the symptoms they might see which requires them to call you for help.