

## **Introduction**

The specialist curriculum at Kestrel House School has been developed in order to focus on 6 essential areas of learning for pupils with autism, these being:

- ❖ Communication Skills
- ❖ Social interaction and understanding
- ❖ Sensory processing and modulation
- ❖ Emotional regulation
- ❖ Behaviour
- ❖ Functional and meaningful life skills

These 6 areas of learning are central to all we do and enable pupils to manage the effects of their Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as independently and effectively as possible and in doing so, remove barriers to their learning potential and life success.

The specialist curriculum is accessed by all pupils at the school at an individualised level of intensity according to their personal needs in relation to their ASD. It is delivered within an autism friendly learning environment with the support of a multi-disciplinary team and incorporates a holistic approach which utilises a number of specialised strategies that have been shown to have a positive impact in supporting pupils with ASD to develop skills within the 6 essential areas of learning. For many pupils, this aspect of the curriculum is the main focus of their learning and, as such, they will have individual targets within each lesson which focus on these 6 essential areas of learning as priority rather than on the academic subject being studied.

## **The Autism Friendly Learning Environment**

The learning environment is actively managed to ensure it provides pupils with a safe, calm and low distraction context in which they can focus and learn. First and foremost, this is done through the physical environment. The building is light, airy, and is neutrally decorated. It has classrooms which provide pupils with personal space and designated calm /quiet areas which pupils can use to help them regulate their levels of alertness. There are also calm rooms located on each floor, which allows pupils an additional low stimulus space to feel safe and to take a break when needed. The physical environment is enhanced by providing clear structure and organisation based on the TEACCH approach. This helps pupils to understand what to do and what is expected of them in each part of the classroom and in lessons. Key strategies employed by staff are:

- ❖ Ensuring the classroom is clutter free and that displays are near, tidy and relevant to the pupils
- ❖ Using screens and furniture to clearly define different areas of the classroom, for instance; circle time, group table, choosing, computer, quiet area, work stations
- ❖ Providing pupils with their own distraction free workstation where they can work 1:1 with a member of staff to learn new skills or independently on familiar tasks which are organised into individual trays or folders and enable pupils to work in an organised manner from left to right

- ❖ Providing pupils with a daily visual timetable which might be written, pictorial or use objects of reference depending on the pupil's level of understanding and enables them to know what is going to happen during the day and be aware of any changes that might occur
- ❖ Providing pupils with 'in lesson' and activity schedules which helps them to understand what they need to do within a given lesson or a specific activity

The autism friendly environment is enhanced still further by ensuring that all staff, and where appropriate, pupils interact with those around them in a way that makes them feel listened to, valued and respected. This leads to a 'positive learning environment', which enables pupils to develop self-esteem and build a positive perception of themselves. This, in turn, helps them to feel more confident and be more willing to try new things and encounter new experiences without fear of failure. Key strategies include:

- ❖ Using high amounts of focussed praise which tells pupils what they have done well i.e. 'Good sitting' or 'Good maths work'
- ❖ Telling pupils what we want them to do rather than what we want them to stop doing 'Good walking' rather than 'stop running'
- ❖ Having high expectations of all pupils

### **Communication skills**

Communication is recognised as underpinning all aspects of the whole child approach for pupils with ASD. All pupils with ASD, regardless of where they are on the autistic spectrum, have communication difficulties. Communication is a two way process and involves both expressive communication (How someone communicates) and receptive communication (How someone understands what is communicated to them.) Pupils with ASD have difficulties in both these areas and the relationship between the two may be skewed with some pupils having expressive skills which are more developed than their receptive skills and others having receptive skills which are more developed than their expressive skills.

Verbal communication only accounts for a small percentage of what we communicate; the majority of our communication is done non-verbally, through body language, facial expressions and quality of voice. Pupils with ASD also have difficulties in understanding and using these aspects of communication.

The 'two way' aspect of the communication process means that any communication difficulty is shared between the communicator and the communicative partner, it is therefore up to staff, as communicative partners for pupils with communication difficulties, to adapt their communication skills in order to interact with pupils in ways that encourage and invite them to share meaningful interactions and develop their communicative potential. Key strategies deployed by staff include:

For receptive communication:

- ❖ Input and advice from a qualified specialist Speech and Language Therapist
- ❖ Intensive Interaction which encourages staff to communicate with pupils at an appropriate level for their cognitive abilities
- ❖ Using adapted levels of verbal communication which correlate with the pupil's receptive rather than expressive communicative skills
- ❖ Using key words or short sentences when talking to pupils
- ❖ Allowing pupils processing time which enables them to take in what has been communicated to them and formulate an answer before having to respond to it
- ❖ Supporting their verbal communication with written words, gestures, pictures, photographs or objects such as 'wait' symbols and checklists

- ❖ Speaking slowly and clearly in a calm voice
- ❖ Not raising their voices
- ❖ Saying what they mean and meaning what they say
- ❖ Using the pupils name first to attract their attention
- ❖ Limiting their use of sarcasm and idioms
- ❖ Breaking longer instructions down into smaller steps
- ❖ Actively teaching pupils about different aspects of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions

For expressive communication:

- ❖ Intensive Interaction which enables pupils to understand that their communicative attempts are recognised and valued
- ❖ Ensuring that pupils have access and are able to use alternative communication methods which are suited to their needs e.g. the Picture Exchange Communication System which might use objects of reference, photos, pictures, symbols or words according to the pupils ability to understand each.
- ❖ Providing environmental communication cards which enable pupils to make requests for example 'toilet' 'break' and 'help'
- ❖ Providing choice boards within the classroom
- ❖ Using a visual scale to support pupils in using the correct volume of voice
- ❖ Actively teaching pupils about using non-verbal communication e.g. facial expressions, body language and quality of voice
- ❖ Providing structured opportunities through drama and role play where pupils can practice their communication skills
- ❖ Providing 'real life' opportunities for pupils to practice their communication skills for instance on educational visits
- ❖ Being explicit in indicating whose turn it is in a conversation 'Caroline, your turn to talk has finished, it's my turn now'
- ❖ Modelling appropriate language

### **Sensory processing and modulation**

We recognise that individuals with ASD may have difficulty processing and modulating sensory information and therefore, may become over or under responsive to sensory input or experiences. This may lead to anxiety, confusion, or frustration, which can impact a person's level of independence and/or behavioural responses.

#### *Sensory Processing*

Sensory processing refers to how we process sensory information from our environment and our bodies. We receive information from the following senses: touch (tactile); hearing (auditory); taste (gustatory); smell (olfactory); sight (visual); proprioception and vestibular.

#### *Sensory Modulation*

Modulation is the ability to regulate/maintain arousal so that you can orient, focus attention on meaningful sensory events, and maintain an alert but relaxed state. It is this optimum level of arousal which allows us to function meaningfully within our environment. Some people have difficulty modulating sensory information. This can result in being over or under stimulated. We all have thresholds that need to be met by incoming sensory input. Without adequate sensory input we are unable to maintain an

organised calm state. If an individual's thresholds are too high they will need more intense input to meet their needs. If their thresholds are too low they will be easily overwhelmed.

Adequate sensory processing is the foundation for higher skills such as learning, attention, writing, listening, reading and movement activities. Good sensory processing requires sensory modulation and sensory discrimination. Sensory impairments have an impact on a student with ASD perception of the world around them. Their attention and arousal will be affected, thus influencing their learning and performance levels. Also, their learning styles and the way the store information will be different. Motor functioning also involving sensory processing and modulation, affect their ability to perform tasks. Sensory input is part of everyday learning. Commonly used play equipment and games often have sensory elements. For example, playground equipment, such as swings, slides and sandboxes includes vestibular, tactile and proprioception input. These activities or resource are often used for leisure and play during free play or break time.

At Kestrel House school we understand that pupils may have sensory difficulties. Knowing and understanding what type of sensory input our students seek and/or avoid will help us better support their learning. Identifying what sensory input they find calming or alerting will also help us work and interact with them to their best abilities. This information about an individual's sensory profile can help in managing their arousal, attention, or alert levels for greater independence in everyday functional tasks.

Key strategies include:

- ❖ Information and advice from an on-site Occupational Therapist who has postgraduate training in Sensory Integration
- ❖ Providing a 'low' stimulus learning environment with reduced levels of displays and bright colours
- ❖ Distraction free work stations which have the minimal amount of items displayed in them
- ❖ Employ aspects of the Alert programme
- ❖ Quiet areas and calm rooms which pupils can access if they are becoming overloaded
- ❖ Recognition that playtimes need to be a balance between encouraging pupil interaction and allowing time for pupils to carry out their self regulatory behaviour
- ❖ Providing sensory equipment such as wobble cushions, ear defenders and 'fiddle' toys which pupils can access as and when they need them in order to self regulate their levels of sensory input
- ❖ Providing regular, integrated sensory-based movement breaks throughout the day
- ❖ Providing regular opportunities throughout the day for pupils to self-regulate
- ❖ Providing visual timetables which clearly show pupils when they will be able to carry out their self-regulation activity
- ❖ Providing clear guidance to staff on how to support pupils to change self regulatory behaviour which is deemed to be socially inappropriate, for spinning objects or climbing furniture
- ❖ Providing opportunities for pupils to experience new sensory experiences in a safe, fun, and meaningful way, especially with new textures, foods, and tastes
- ❖ Delivering multi-sensory lessons, which enable pupils to learn using visual, auditory, proprioceptive, vestibular, and tactile inputs.

### **Emotional Regulation**

The concept of emotion is a highly complex one. It refers to the internal state experienced by a person in response to an actual, remembered or imagined situation, event or interaction. Emotions can be positive such as excitement and happiness or negative such as anger or anxiety. The difficulties that people with autism have in relation to understanding non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, body language and quality of voice results in them finding it very difficult to recognise when someone else is feeling emotional and what emotion they are displaying. In addition, people with autism find it extremely difficult to identify their own emotions and to then put a name to them. Often they know they are 'emotional' but do not know which emotion they are experiencing and may therefore show their emotion in unexpected or unusual ways, for instance laughing when they are upset. They may also experience emotions at an extreme for example extreme anxiety about experiencing something new. Self-regulation of emotions involves the ability to adjust your emotional reactions and modify emotional responses according to the social and physical context you are in, so, for instance, screaming and jumping up and down with joy when your football team score a goal may be acceptable at the football stadium but to do the same at a wedding because you are feeling joyful would not be appropriate. It also involves the ability to recover from extreme emotional reactions and to maintain or return to the task in-hand. At Kestrel House school we recognise the need to teach pupils emotional regulation skills in order to help them to enable to focus and engage on the learning tasks they are undertaking. Key strategies include:

- ❖ Input and advice from a Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, or Assistant Psychologist who is trained in the use of the SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, Transactional Support) model.
- ❖ Providing mutual regulation which enables pupils to request and/or respond to assistance from others in helping them to regulate their emotional levels
- ❖ Providing quiet areas and calm rooms which pupils can access if their emotions are at an extreme
- ❖ Enabling pupils to develop emotional understanding at a level appropriate to their developmental rather than their chronological age
- ❖ Actively teaching pupils about their own emotions by using:
  - Mirrors, photos and videos so they can see their own facial expression
  - Emotions key rings which display the emotion on one side and suggestions as to how they can react on the other
  - Acknowledging their emotions and explicitly telling them how they are feeling 'Oh you're excited, that was exciting wasn't it'
  - Drama and role play
- ❖ Actively teaching pupils about other people's emotions by using:
  - Photographs and videos to support the recognition of facial expressions and body language
  - Drama and role play
  - Being explicit about and drawing attention to our own emotions ' Look at my face, you have made me feeling happy'

### **Social Interaction and Understanding**

In order to make and sustain relationships with other people, we naturally develop a range of social skills including empathy, turn taking, proximity, reading social cues and understanding social rules. We also take on a range of social roles depending upon the social context we find ourselves in, for instance a person's role when they are at work will differ from their role when they are at home. Both roles require different language and different behaviour and come with different expectations from the other

people within the social context. People with ASD do not develop social skills naturally and find it extremely difficult to read a given social context and take on the correct social roles within it. Kestrel House recognises that pupils who attend the school will need help to develop these skills and that they will not develop naturally. Key strategies include:

- ❖ Providing supported opportunities for pupils to develop social skills through playing, sharing and turn taking
- ❖ Actively teaching about social expectations
- ❖ Using social stories to explain social situations
- ❖ Using comic strip conversations to explain about other people's thoughts
- ❖ Teaching key phrases to use in specified social situations for instance greeting a stranger
- ❖ Enabling pupils to practice social skills in a structured environment through drama, role play and video
- ❖ Providing opportunities for pupils to practice their social skills in 'real life' situations

### **Behaviour**

'Challenging' behaviour related to communication, sensory, flexibility, and social interaction difficulties are often associated with ASD. Our approach to behaviour intervention emphasises on preventing difficulties from arising versus reacting to or coping to behaviour, which have already occurred. Kestrel house school recognises that all behaviour, including physical aggression, is a form of communication, and, for the pupil displaying it, is a solution to a problem they have. Often pupils display maladaptive behaviour in response to their difficulties with communication, sensory and emotional regulation and social understanding, which lead to frustration, anxiety and overload.

At Kestrel House School we take a pro-active rather than a re-active approach to supporting behaviour. We focus on addressing the underlying causes of the behaviour and putting strategies in place to minimise the impact these have on each pupil. Key strategies include:

- ❖ Input and advice from an assistant Psychologist and an Educational Psychologist
- ❖ Using the 5P Approach to behaviour intervention
- ❖ Providing a calm and safe learning environment
- ❖ Drawing up a 'working with me' booklet for each pupil
- ❖ Actively teaching pupils self-management skills such as relaxation techniques and removing themselves from the source of their anxiety
- ❖ Setting clear boundaries and expectations about behaviour and using visual cues to support these
- ❖ Using positive reward systems for appropriate behaviour
- ❖ Using high levels of focused praise which tells pupils what they have done well 'Good Maths work' or 'Good sitting during assembly' rather than 'Well Done'
- ❖ Using negotiation rather than confrontation which avoids getting into a 'win/lose' situation with a pupil
- ❖ Using positive language which tells pupils what we want them to do rather than what we want them to stop doing; 'Good Walking' rather than 'Stop Running'

- ❖ Using pupils strengths and interests to keep them motivated and engaged
- ❖ Drawing up a behaviour support plan which identifies the possible underlying causes of behaviour and details the pro active strategies to help minimise these
- ❖ Thinking 'What is this young person trying to tell me?' when an unacceptable behaviour does occur (I'm bored, I don't understand, I don't like that smell, I need to move, I want something etc)
- ❖ Ensuring re-active strategies are used consistently by all staff when any unacceptable behaviour does occur
- ❖ Remaining calm and neutral
- ❖ Separating the behaviour from the pupil 'I like you... but I don't like what you're doing'
- ❖ Providing good role models for pupils
- ❖ Staff trained in Team Teach strategies

### **Functional and Meaningful Life Skills**

One of the main aims of Kestrel House School is to enable all pupils to be as independent as possible. A key element of this is to teach functional like skills such as dressing, washing, cleaning, cooking, shopping, budgeting, travel skills and use of leisure time, which will support pupils in their independence. Key strategies include:

- ❖ Providing regular opportunities within the timetable for pupils to learn and practice life skills such as cooking a meal or washing dishes
- ❖ Ensuring Maths and English lessons focus on the development of life skills such as reading a bus timetable, using money or writing a shopping list
- ❖ Providing 'real life' situations in which pupils can use and develop their life skills, for instance shopping in a supermarket or using the bus
- ❖ Enabling pupils to access accredited courses which focus on life skills e.g. ASDAN, AQA Unit Awards
- ❖ Providing regular opportunities throughout the day for pupils to make choices and solve simple problems
- ❖ Using visual schedules for activities such as teeth brushing, getting dressed and hand washing which enable pupils to complete these activities without the support of another person
- ❖ Providing opportunities for pupils to experience different leisure pursuits such as playing board games, swimming and rock climbing

### **Conclusion**

The specialist curriculum as Kestrel House School supports pupils in developing essential skills which, ultimately improve the quality of their lives and help them to become as independent as possible, as such it forms a vitally important part of the school's curriculum and, for some pupils takes priority over the development of academic skills.