

# Understanding ASD 2

## Welcome to Module 6 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module we look specifically at Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), what it is, how to recognise it, how it affects people and what that might mean in your classroom.

## Aims

By the end of this module, I will be able to:

- understand why ASD learners have specific social and learning needs
- further adapt my practice to accommodate the specific learning needs of ASD learners
- be more motivated to take action to unleash the potential of ASD



## Test yourself

*Autism is a condition that affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others (and which often means that others do not understand how to communicate with the autistic student). But more and more, researchers and society in general are beginning to understand it in a more rounded, balanced way, and not simply as an impairment.*

Take the true or false quiz to see how well you understand autism.

**1. Scientists believe that ASD people were crucial in the development of agriculture and early civilisation, and the discovery of fire**

True  False

**2. "Rainman" (movie) is an accurate depiction of an autistic person**

True  False

**3. Children with autism cannot go to regular schools.**

True  False

**4. People with autism can live perfectly well independently as long as they are given the support to do so by making guided modifications and attending support groups to achieve better results.**

True  False

**5. Autism can occur alone or associated with other developmental disorders, such as learning disabilities, epilepsy, Attention Deficit Disorder, among others.**

True  False

**6. People with autism perform better in jobs that require some degree of repetition of activities and are structured.**

True  False

## Reflexive question

Did any of the answers to these questions surprise you? If so, take five minutes to check on the internet to find the stories and research behind the answers.

## Answers

1. true, 2. false, 3. false, 4. true, 5. true, 6. true

## Supporting students with autism in the classroom: what teachers need to know

*In this section, we hope you can come to have a greater understanding of the impact teachers have when they enable ASD students to reach their potential and do great things.*

Read the two stories below, and ask yourself: what is the main message in each of the passages?

### Story 1: Greta Thunberg and autism

How beautiful it is to hear Greta Thunberg talk about autism as a gift. The 16-year-old is making waves with her quietly assured and authoritative speeches about global warming and her openness about her autism.

“I see the world a bit different, from another perspective,” she said in a New Yorker interview. “It’s very common that people on the autism spectrum have a special interest. ... I can do the same thing for hours.” Thunberg discovered her special interest in climate change when she was just 9 years old, and she couldn’t understand why everyone on the planet wasn’t similarly obsessed with preventing it.

You most probably have read many stories about this inspirational young girl in the past few months and we don’t want to discuss her work on climate emergency. We just want to celebrate a young person who credits her special talent, leadership skills and determination to her autism. A few years ago, her ascent to fame likely would have been framed in the media as that of an

inspiring young girl “overcoming” her disability to become the leader of a worldwide movement. But Thunberg herself thinks differently, she says that she became an activist not in spite of her autism but because of it.

“Being different is a gift. It makes me see things from outside the box. I don’t easily fall for lies, I can see through things. If I would’ve been like everyone else, I wouldn’t have started this school strike for instance.”

### Story 2: Greta’s teachers, and how they helped her

Greta had not always been a brave heroine, famous throughout the world for her determination. On the contrary: before beginning her incredible adventure in front of the Swedish Parliament, she was a withdrawn, silent and shy girl. The typical student who follows the classes in silence, sitting where nobody notices her, in the last rows. Nothing particularly striking had happened in her life, nothing that would make one suspect that one day she would convince hundreds of thousands of young people to follow her example.

However, she had been interested in the environment for a long time. She was still a child when she first heard about it. At the age of eight she discovered that the planet’s climate was changing at a rapid pace.

At school, teachers often reminded students how important it was to turn off the lights every time they left a room, to save electricity and not waste water or food. All these recommendations aroused the interest of Greta, who asked a very simple question: “Why?”

Then they explained to her that human beings, with their daily activities, could cause climate change.

This situation seemed very serious to Greta: if things were really like this, we should all be very worried. In fact, it didn't take a university degree to realise that this was a very serious issue, and she, who was still a child, found it terrifying. But strangely enough, no adult seemed to care much about it - and that was the most worrying thing of all!

Some time before, at school, they showed a documentary about the plastic that invades the oceans. The screen showed hungry polar bears and suffering animals. Like the rest of the class, Greta was very impressed and concerned by that story. She had been crying the whole time. However, as soon as the lights came back on after the film, her classmates started talking about other things: about recess time, what they were going to do in the afternoon or their homework for the next day. Greta, on the other hand, could not do that. The images of the planet contaminated by plastic stuck in her mind and she couldn't get them out of her head.

## Reflexive question

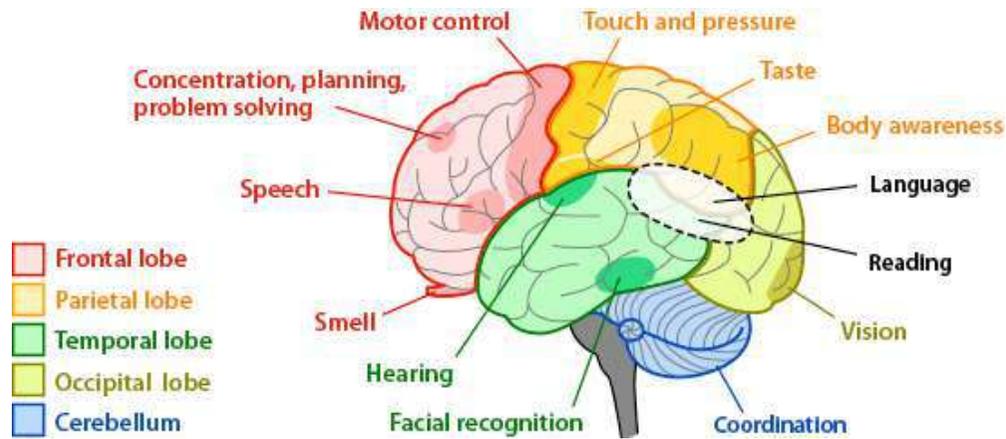
What were the most important messages from each of these stories?

## Awareness Deepening

*In this section you will look at some of the environmental factors that influence autistic people's interactions with the world, and understand them in relation to their sensory experiences.*

### Part one: Rephrasing weaknesses

Everyone has specific strengths, weaknesses and needs. The image (below) shows some of the cognitive functions that differ between the ASD brain and the allistic (non-ASD) brain.



Source: Brett Szymik. (2011, May 09). What's Your Brain Doing?. ASU - Ask A Biologist. Retrieved June 28, 2021 from <https://askbiologist.asu.edu/brain-regions>

1. Think of an ASD student you have known. What differences did you see in this student? Did you see differences in any of the functions marked on the image?

2. Read your sentence again to check your language. If you said, for instance, that these students were “speech impaired”, can you rephrase this into something less negative? (For example, instead of “speech impaired”, try rephrasing as “they benefit when we create an engaged and clear environment for communication”)

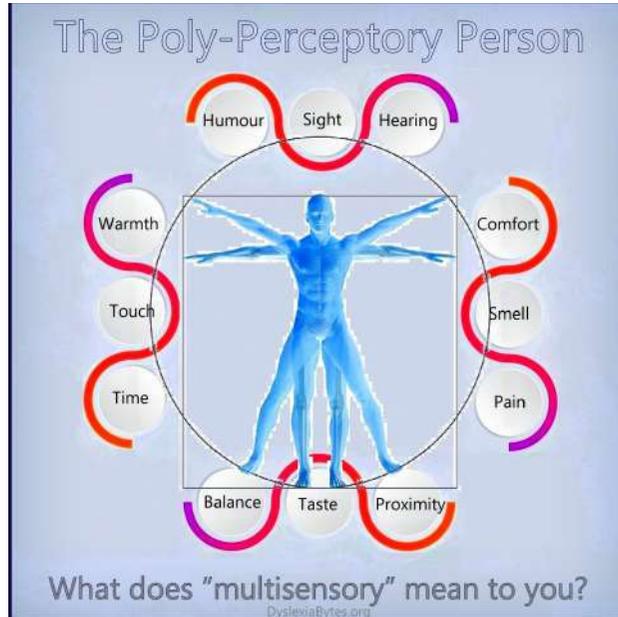
For more ideas of how to do this, you can see these websites:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability>

[http://www.aucd.org/docs/add/sa\\_summits/Language%20Doc.pdf](http://www.aucd.org/docs/add/sa_summits/Language%20Doc.pdf)

## Part two: Sensory overload

What does 'multisensory' mean to you? As humans we have more than the basic five senses.

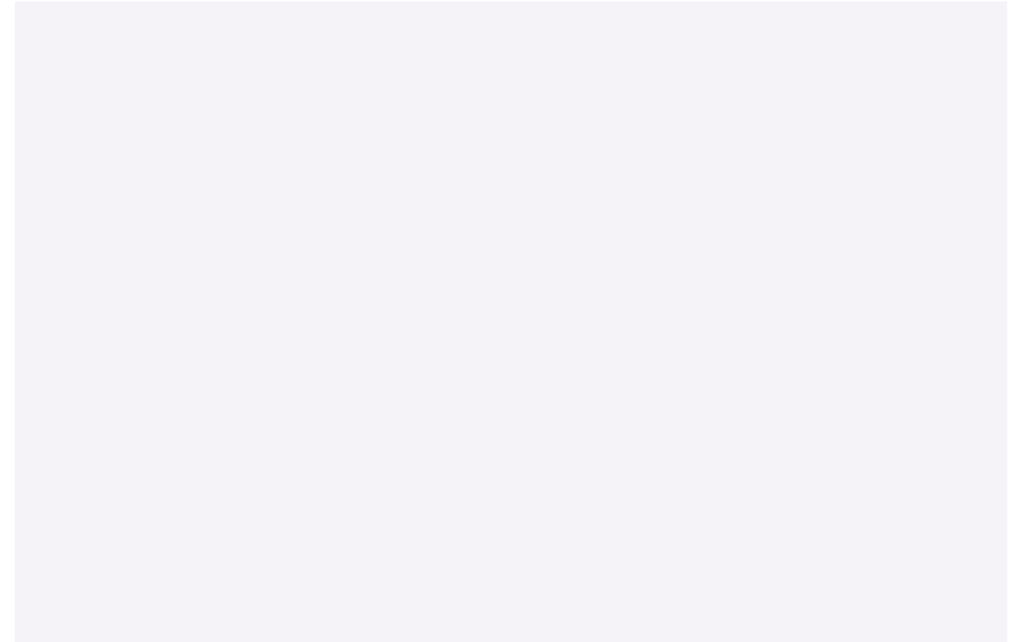


What is it like to be extremely sensitive to all these different senses in daily situations? Watch this video showing the resulting sensory overload 'crisis points' because of the neurological differences in processing.



Or paste this link in your browser  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KurXpARairU>

Think about your own classroom. What are some of the 'crisis points'? How could the 'other' senses could overwhelm ASD students in your environment?



## Part three: Temple Grandin case study

Dr Temple Grandin is autistic. She was recently named one of the top ten college professors in the United States. Watch Temple Grandin's Ted Talk . What does she say are her strengths?

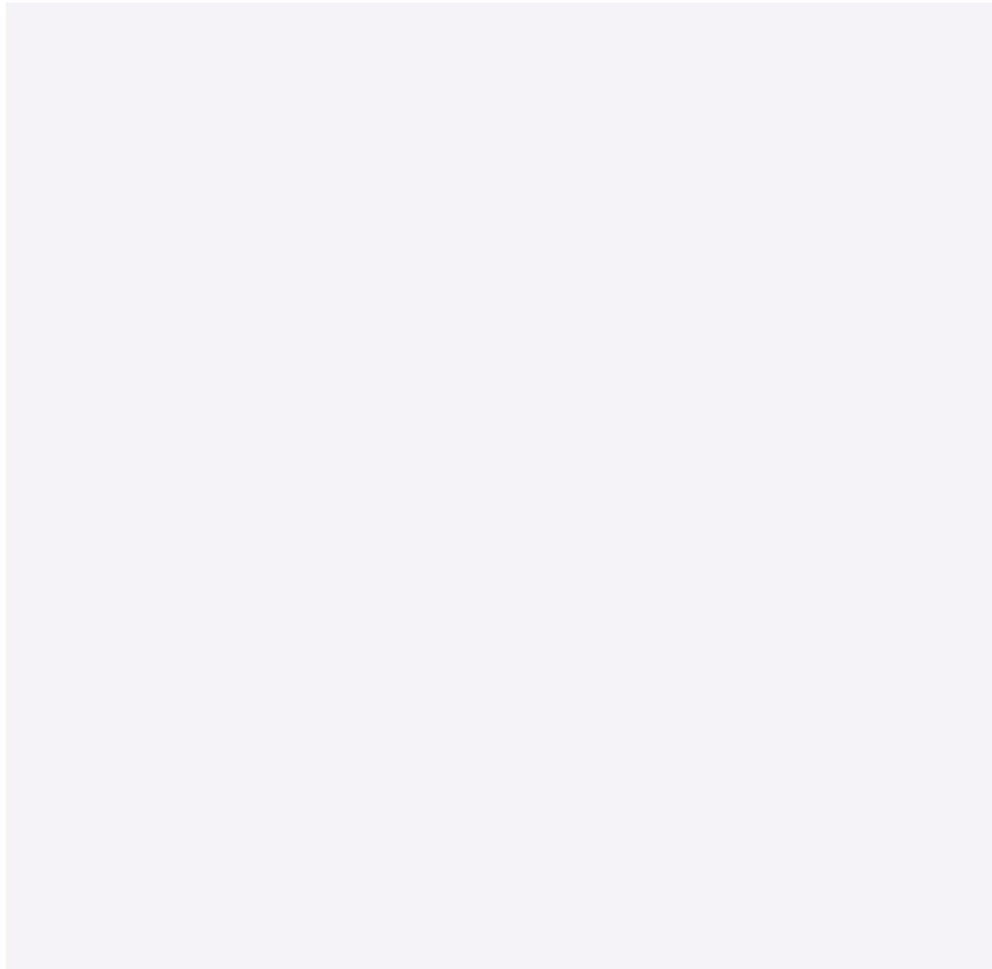


Or paste this link in your browser [https://www.ted.com/talks/temple\\_grandin\\_the\\_world\\_needs\\_all\\_kinds\\_of\\_minds?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/temple_grandin_the_world_needs_all_kinds_of_minds?language=en)

## Reflexive questions

Now you have learnt a little about Temple Grandin, and you have looked at some of the crisis points for potential sensory overload in your school.

What ideas can you use from these video to build a classroom environment that allows detailed focus to be a positive part of the learning experience?



## Idea!

Why not make a video of your own school in order to identify and think about the 'crisis points' in your own classroom. Go round your school, identifying all the crisis points where there is a danger of "sensory overload".

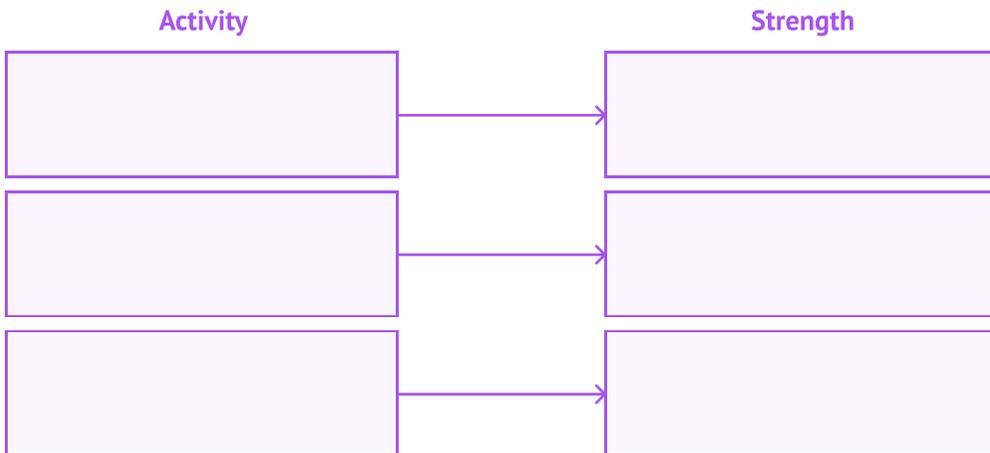


## Autism Strengths

Often, people think of autism / ASD as a “spectrum of weaknesses”, but this isn’t only untrue, it’s unfair to the millions of people around the world who are autistic. In this section, you are going to look at a couple of the strengths that are often associated with ASD.

1. Look back at your notes about Temple Gradin. Write at least three strengths of the ASD learner:

2. Now, think about some activities that you do in the classroom. Can you map the ASD strengths onto these activities?



3. Now try some “reverse thinking”. Think for a while, and come up with a task that is as autism-unfriendly as possible! Be as creative as you like. What makes it autism-unfriendly? What are the most unfriendly parts of this activity? Why are they so unfriendly to ASD students?

Keep this in mind. Remember at all times what it is that is so unfriendly to your autistic students.

4. Now think of one new learning task or activity (not a full lesson plan) for your context that activates the strengths of autism. E.g, the ability to see detail, and is autism-friendly

Write down when, how, and with whom you intend to use this activity. What results do you expect from implementing this activity? Don’t forget to include why this activity specifically autism-friendly.



## Tools to reduce the overwhelmed feeling of both teacher and students

*You are about to explore five ways to help your ASD students with anxiety.*

### Pinpoint what triggers anxiety

Identifying what causes the child's anxiety can be helpful in identifying ways to help them. If the anxiety trigger is known, you can help the child cope with and possibly overcome their fears. Parents and teachers may encourage the child to engage in situations that are anxiety provoking (but safe), and praise or reward the child when they do so.

### Safe spaces

For children who have anxiety, providing a safe space for them when they are feeling anxious or overwhelmed can be helpful. However, it is important to keep in mind that a safe space should not be used as a regular solution to anxiety. Rather, it should be used only when needed during extreme situations. If a safe space is overused they could become a way to escape daily life and activities in fear of anxiety triggers, which is not the intention. Often, a child who is experiencing social anxiety at school will become overwhelmed while interacting with peers in group settings, walking down a busy hallway, or eating in a noisy lunchroom. If a child is experiencing extreme anxiety from these things, a teacher may create a safe space that can include beanbags, calming games such as some puzzles, stress balls, or relaxing music. Different things will relax different children, so it's important to keep the child's individual needs in mind while creating a safe space.

### Visual Schedules and Transitions

Children with anxiety and autism often struggle to transition between activities at school and during daily life. The struggle to transition between activities can often be intensified if children are transitioning between a high-preference activity and an activity they do not enjoy. To help with this, many children can benefit from a visual schedule, which may include a picture of the activity and a time that the activity will occur. These schedules can help children know what to expect and in turn reduce anxiety levels. It may also be helpful to show the child a picture or video of transitioning smoothly to the next activity before doing so. The video or picture can provide a positive example of a smooth transition, but can also help the child know what is coming up next.

### Social Stories

Social stories can be a great way for teachers and parents to show children situations before they happen. A social story can be as simple as a story about walking to the cafeteria or going to a grocery store, but the story should model what events will likely occur during the situation. By reading the social story before the event happens, children may feel less anxious about what is going to happen. It's also an option to create a social story that shows something anxiety provoking, and modeling a way to overcome this. By modeling this through a social story, children may be more likely to handle the situation in a calm manner. Stages Learning Language Builder Sequencing Cards help children navigate transitions by providing visual cues as to what is going to happen next such as washing hands, brushing teeth, or what is involved in going to the grocery store. Because children with autism are frequently visual learners it can help children understand a social story by providing a set of cards indicating next steps.



## Relaxation techniques

There's a lot of recent research coming into schools about relaxation techniques such as meditation. Meditation has been shown to help many students reduce their anxiety levels, from test-taking anxiety to anxiety in daily life. However, meditation may not be the right fit for every student who is experiencing anxiety, which is important to keep in mind while searching for anxiety reducing techniques. Stages Learning has put together a helpful sheet on how to introduce and use meditation for children with autism.



## Check your understanding

Take a short quiz to check you've understood the main points of the module.

### 1. Autistic students are...

- a) disabled
- b) impaired
- c) unlike allistic students
- d) the same as everyone else

### 2. Autism...

- a) is a combination of sensory stimuli
- b) involves an increased risk of sensory overload
- c) is a social rather than neurological construct
- d) means that students will speak slowly

### 3. Autism is...

- a) a combination of strengths and weaknesses
- b) a superpower
- c) a symptom of improper brain development
- d) a combination of weaknesses

### 4. Sensory overload...

- a) can be extremely irritating for autistic students
- b) can be ignored with practice
- c) can cause anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed
- d) is a fact of life, and cannot be helped

### 5. Things that help autistic students include...

- a) getting rid of all sensory input
- b) managing the autistic student so he or she does not come into contact with sensory input
- c) managing the environment so that sensory overload can be avoided
- d) sending the autistic student home, in order to help him or her avoid sensory overload

## Answers

1c, 2b, 3a, 4c, 5c.

## Reflect on the module

*In this final section, think about what you've learned this module and how you can use this in your day-to-day working life.*

1. What is your biggest takeaway from this module about the challenges that ASD learners face in the classroom?

2. What do you commit to changing in your practice to accommodate the basic needs of ASD students?

3. What do you understand about how ASD impacts different people in different ways?