



SOCIAL ARTS FOR EDUCATION

SPELL Framework

July 2019

SPELL Framework

Introduction

Social Arts for Education (SAFE) supports the education of children aged between 11 and 18 years old who have been withdrawn from school due to bullying, anxiety and/or learning and social differences. Many of the children we teach and support have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and need their environment, teaching and communication considered carefully to allow them to feel and be comfortable, understood and supported.

SAFE staff undergo training in autism yearly to ensure its pupils the best learning experience possible. The SPELL framework, which is used in many special schools, including National Autistic Society affiliated schools, is used by SAFE throughout its day to day work and also behind the scenes, when planning and making decisions on a managerial level.

The acronym for the SPELL framework stands for **Structure, Positive** (approaches and expectations), **Empathy, Low arousal**, and **Links**. Below, you can read more about each strand of the framework and how it is useful in identifying underlying issues, reducing the disabling effects of the condition and providing a cornerstone for communication.

As well as the basic training given on a person's induction day, staff are expected to read and develop an understanding of this document; reporting to it when necessary and asking managerial staff, who can help the development of understanding.

Staff are expected to learn the background, characteristics and issues surrounding autism as well as the SPELL framework in which SAFE uses as a guide to create a safe and understanding environment.

Knowledge of Autism and its Background

Autism is a **developmental disability affecting how people relate** with others and the world around them.

Autism is often defined by the 'Triad of Impairments'. These impairments include difficulties in **social communication, social interaction and social imagination**. Many believe that there should be a fourth impairment (impairment in sensory processing).

The causes of autism are still unknown, although it has been proven that autism is biological in nature and appears to have a genetic predisposition. Many believe environmental factors can also cause or 'trigger' autism.

Autism affects approximately **1 in 100** people, however, many people think that there are more autistic people in our population than recorded.

The prevalence of autism is documented to be greater in males than females although statistics are challenged by many who believe females display autistic characteristics in a different way, therefore, not being diagnosed as much as males.

What does Autism Look Like? The Triad of Impairments

Social Interaction

Difficulty with social relationships (e.g. making friends and learning how to socialise instinctively). Children often have difficulty recognising others' emotions, understanding unwritten social rules, prefer their own company or not know how to initiate friendships or conversations appropriately. They may seem 'aloof and indifferent', 'overly passive' or 'active but odd'. Interactions between others are not instinctively learnt and therefore sometimes seem staged or rehearsed (as they are often 'taught' by someone).

Social Communication

Difficulty with verbal communication (talking) and nonverbal communication (facial expressions and body language). Some people are non-verbal but understand well, others speak but understand little. Language can differ in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure and comprehension. Receptive language (what others say) is a common difficulty. When speaking to a child with autism, one must make sure speech is clear, the amount of words are reduced and that sarcasm and metaphors are only used if there is an explanation on offer afterwards. Make sentences clear and reduce ambiguity in all communication, including signage (WC's for example) and instructions (give one at a time).

Social Imagination (Flexibility of thought, Theory of Mind)

Difficulty in recognising what others' feel and think. Autistic children often have difficulties playing games and imagining (eg rather than play a racing game with toy cars, a child with autism may spend many hours simply spinning the wheels of an upturned car). Children often find it hard to imagine others' mental states, their thoughts, feelings and desires. Concepts of time are often hindered by a difficulty in flexibility of thought. Some children need visual props (timers) to understand what 'in an hour' means. They may also find it difficult to imagine consequences (if you do this now, this will happen later). The inability of not predicting situations may also mean they appear to have no sense of danger. Preparing and planning for the future is often tricky. To imagine what they want to do in the future and how to get to that point can be very hard for some. Sequencing achievable steps visually can help autistic children achieve goals.

Sensory Processing (the missing, fourth impairment)

Difficulty in processing outside stimuli such as sounds, tastes, visual stimuli, touch and smells. There are also difficulties in the child's own spatial awareness and balance. Autistic children often experience 'melt-downs' which are episodes of distress caused by an overload of sensory input. A melt-down should not be confused with a tantrum. A child experiencing a melt-down should be taken to an area with low-arousal (no hugging, touching, talking or objects offered unless the child requests). Displays, windows, noise, crowds, arrangement of furniture, music, perfumes and fabrics etc. should all be considered when assessing the learning environment for autistic children. Sensory Integration is a therapy that should be incorporated into day to day life, allowing the child to 'balance' their sense receptors (the way they receive outside information) as most children are both hypersensitive (over) *and* hyposensitive (under) to outside stimuli.

Staff are encouraged to notice and analyse the following characteristics when working with autistic children. It is good practice to think about what impairment (social interaction, social communication and social imagination) cause these characteristics to help develop a deeper understanding of autism.

Characteristics of Autism

R – Rigidity

Children have an insistence on sameness. Sameness, routines and habitual behaviours create predictability and security. Because children with autism have difficulties with flexibility of thought, planning and predicting are hard to do. Having the same thing happen over and over again provides a reassurance that nothing which may cause upset (often linked to sensory issues) will happen. This means children with autism find changes daunting and often distressing.

O – Obsessive Interests

Many obsessive interests are self-stimulating and repetitive (eating certain foods, watching DVD over and over etc.). Difficulties in prediction can lead to children liking the same activity and sensory issues can lead to self-stimulating behaviours. Special interests can be comforting, they can develop into skills and expertise and also be a good motivation tool but obsessions are considered to be debilitating. For example, a man wouldn't go to his sister's wedding because his favourite football team were playing on the same day.

D – Difficulty in Shifting Attention

This is due to slow processing skills, caused by sensory processing difficulties. If a child is paying attention to one thing (or processing one object or interaction) they may find it hard to quickly switch their focus on something else. Multi-tasking is normally very difficult for autistic children. Some find it impossible to listen and look at the same time.

E – Exceptional Rote and Visual Memory

Many children with autism (although by no means all) have an excellent rote and visual memory. They can often remember maps, diagrams and routes very well, pick out detail in pictures and recall facts that they have heard or read. Sometimes poor comprehension means they don't always use the information in the right context or understand the meaning behind things. This ability should be used and encouraged in the learning environment to support the child reaching their full potential.

R – Repetitive Behaviours (Stimming)

Spinning, flapping of hands and arms, chewing, nodding, jumping up and down and humming are all repetitive behaviours that many autistic children display. Usually for self-stimulation, the child engages in these behaviours for their bodies 'crave' sensory input. Sometimes these behaviours inter-link with special interests or obsessions (owning pets or trampolining etc.). It is not recommended to restrict children from stimming. It is good practice to allow the child ample opportunities to carry out self-stimulating behaviours for development of sensory processing. Lessons should always include some opportunity for this. Occupational Therapy resources are readily available around the centre.

A – Adaptive Strategies (Difficulties in)

Adaptive strategies are what help us get out of sticky situations. They help us figure out what to do to get or get out of something. Most neurotypical children learn to lie by the age of four. Typically, autistic children fail to realise that other people think differently. For example, they may not realise

that lying could save them being told off, or that telling a 'white-lie' could save a friendship. Some children think that if they know something, others automatically know it too. This is where they fail to realise that others think differently to them, or indeed, fail to consider the thoughts of others altogether. Difficulties in this area are due to poor interactive skills which are normally instinctive. The failure to use adaptive strategies affects a child's ability to think for themselves. Most children need telling what to do, or support in problem solving (using visual aids such as drawings for abstract problems etc.).

J – Joint Attention (Difficulties in)

Joint attention is an instinctive behaviour neurotypical children pick up at around nine months old. They learn to follow the gaze of others around them and expecting others to follow their gaze in return. This is the first steps of communicating by: sharing experiences (look, there's a plane in the sky!) asking for something (that's the toy that I want!) and responding (Where's Mummy?). Autistic children don't tend to develop this skill until much later on in life; sometimes, not at all. This makes interaction and communication later in life seem unnatural sometimes, making the child seem to be unaware of others when in conversation or unaware of facial expressions or body language. Typically children with autism will not find conversing with others easy. They may 'jump in' a conversation at the wrong time, talk over or interrupt, not respond to another's statement relevantly or walk away while someone is still talking.

*Staff **must** be aware that behaviours that are defined by these and other characteristics are not **bad** or **naughty** behaviours (eg interrupting the teacher). Many of the children at SAFE have been reprimanded for these behaviours in previous settings become very upset for being told off for something they may not understand they are doing. It is our job as staff at SAFE to ensure we sensitively teach the children how to interact, communicate and behave appropriately.*

It is very rare that a child with autism will purposely display these characteristics.

The SPELL Framework – How Does SAFE Support Children With Autism?

Structure

The importance of structure has long been recognised. It makes the world a more predictable, accessible and safer place. Structure can aid personal autonomy and independence by reducing dependence (eg prompting) on others. The environment and processes are modified to ensure each individual knows what is going to happen and what is expected of them. This can also aid the development of flexibility by reducing dependence on rigid routines. Structure plays to the strengths of a sense of order and preference for visual organisation commonly associated with the autism spectrum.

How do staff apply this day to day?

- Understanding change causes stress and anxiety for many autistic children.
- Sticking to scheduled lessons and timings.
- Explaining what will happen and when.
- Not expecting children to 'know the obvious'.
- Using the same reward and sanction schemes (tick lists).
- Having an understanding of how important routines are for some children and making time

- out in certain circumstances to allow the child to feel secure.
- Programming some change into schedules to help with flexibility.

Positive (approaches and expectations)

It is important that a programme of sensitive but persistent intervention is in place to engage the individual child or adult, minimise regression and discover and develop potential. In this respect it is important that expectations are high but realistic and based on careful assessment. This will include the strengths and individual needs of the person, their level of functioning and an assessment of the support they will need. We must seek to establish and reinforce self-confidence and self-esteem by building on natural strengths, interest and abilities.

It is vital that assessments are made from as wide a perspective as possible and that assumptions are made on the basis of painstaking assessment and not superficial enquiry. These should include a view of the barriers in accessing opportunity. For example, many people on the autism spectrum may have difficulty with oral communication, leading to an underestimation of their ability and potential. Conversely some may have a good grasp of speech but this may mask a more serious level of disability.

Additionally, many people with autism may avoid new or potentially aversive experiences but through the medium of structure and positive, sensitive, supportive rehearsal can reduce their level of anxiety, learn to tolerate and accept such experiences and develop new horizons and skills.

How do staff apply this day to day?

- Understanding low self-esteem is prevalent in children with autism.
- Assessing and taking note of each child's daily living, communication, socialisation and academic performance by way of Individual Care Plans/EHCPs.
- Not leaving the child to his or her own devices.
- Sensitively teach social and life skills.
- Use special interests as motivation tools.
- Intervene if behaviours are likely to reduce opportunity.
- Understand what behaviours are due to autism and what behaviours are not.
- Spot warning signs to emotional and physical discomfort.

Empathy

It is essential to see the world from the standpoint of the child or adult with on the autism spectrum. This is a key ingredient in the 'craft' of working with children and adults with autism. We must begin from the position or perspective of the individual and gather insights about how they see and experience their world, knowing what it is that motivates or interests them but importantly what may also frighten, preoccupy or otherwise distress them.

To make every effort to understand, respect and relate to the experience of the person with autism will underpin our attempts to develop communication and reduce anxiety. In this, the quality of the relationship between the person and supporter is of vital importance. Effective supporters will be endowed with the personal attributes of calmness, predictability and good humour, empathy and an analytical disposition.

How do staff apply this day to day?

- Understand children with autism are stressed more easily than others. The reasons for their stress may seem trivial to others, but it is very real and serious for the child at that time.
- Develop an understanding of how each child thinks and communicates.
- Record and understand each child's stress trigger, needs and sensitivities in their Individual Care Plan.
- Checking to see if child understands what has been said/is expected of them etc.
- Offer devices such as cue cards, ear defenders and time out in hidey-holes.
- Assess level of comprehension throughout teaching and communication.
- Stick to procedures and rules that child is used to.
- Understand that many autistic children cannot regulate their own stress levels. Use resources such as drawings or stress-thermometers to help them express how they feel.

Low arousal

The approaches and environment need to be calm and ordered in such a way so as to reduce anxiety and aid concentration. There should be as few distractions as possible. Some individuals may require additional time to process information, especially if this is auditory. They have additional sensory processing difficulties; they may need extra time to process information or we will need to pay attention to potentially aversive or distracting stimuli, for example noise levels, colour schemes, odours, lighting and clutter. Information is given with clarity in the medium best suited to the individual with care taken not to overload or bombard.

Some individuals may be under responsive to sensory experiences and actually seek additional sensory sensations. Again this is best achieved with an approach where the input can be regulated.

Low arousal should not be confused with "no arousal". It is of course desirable that individuals are exposed to a wide range of experiences but that this is done in a planned and sensitive way. It is recognised that for the most part the individual may benefit most in a setting where sensory and other stimulation can be reduced or controlled. Additionally, supplementary relaxation and arousal reduction therapies, music and massage, sensory diet etc. may be helpful in promoting calm and general well-being and in reducing anxiety.

How do staff apply this day to day?

- Understand that just because you can't see, hear, smell or feel something, doesn't mean others can't either.
- Assess working environment before beginning teaching.
- Have good knowledge of child's sensory needs.
- Speak clearly and calmly. Work quietly.
- Reduce distractions such as visual access to posters and windows etc. noises, smells or materials.
- Offer low-arousal areas.
- Understand what a 'melt-down' is and how to support a child who is having one.
- Allow child time to switch from subject to subject.
- Allow children to leave room without permission if they feel they need to get out quickly.

Links

Strong links between the various components of the person's life or therapeutic programme will promote and sustain essential consistency.

Open links and communication between people (eg parents and teachers) will provide a holistic approach and reduce the possibility of unhelpful misunderstanding or confusion or the adoption of fragmented, piecemeal approaches.

The people with autism, their parents or advocates are very much seen as partners in the therapeutic process. Links with the mainstream, through curriculum and other experiences, enable the individual to participate in a meaningful way in the life of the wider community.

How do staff apply this day to day?

- Read, record and share changes in Individual Care Plans/EHCPs.
- Understand that a child can 'hold on' to a build-up of emotion throughout the day and 'release' at home (the delayed reaction).
- Understand that equally, a child can 'hold on' to a build-up of emotion at home and 'release' somewhere else.
- Build good communicative relationships with families. Report positive experiences as well as ones of concern.
- Talk to other staff about how children are progressing, developing or regressing.
- Re-read reports to look at progress or regress.

Other Characteristics

Of course, autism affects each child in different ways, and the 'spectrum' should not be seen as a sliding scale, more so as a tree branching out in various directions. In this policy, we have listed characteristics that we feel are most apparent in the day to day running of SAFE. We must stress that there are many, many other characteristics of autism; positive and negative, that staff will certainly learn to understand more about throughout their time working with autistic children.

Some of these characteristics include:

Unusual ability with numbers and calculations

Lack of interest in people

Poor motor co-ordination

Literal Understanding

Obsessive Compulsive Behaviours (to the point which limits opportunities)

Fussy or unusual eating habits

Gut problems

Sleep disorders

Anxiety and depression

Extensive curiosity for nature and wildlife

Extensive knowledge in area of special interest

Ability to self-teach in area of special interest (even if learning other things is very difficult)

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All staff are encouraged to discuss their developing knowledge of autism and the SPELL framework regularly with managerial staff.

For further reading on autism, please see managerial staff for a list of research and information on all topics within the condition.

This training tool will be reviewed annually or when legislation/terminology is changed.