

THIS MONTH IS AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH!

Do you want to know what Autism (Asperger Syndrome) is all about?

Each and every child with Autism has their own personality, interests and obsessions, fears and dislikes - no two are the same. This makes Autism not an easy condition to understand.



One of the least known traits of autism among the general public is "sensory issues". This is where the ordinary sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of everyday that you may not even notice can be very painful to these kids. They can have extremely acute hearing and will feel real pain and anxiety over loud noises. Fluorescent lights can seem overly bright and pulsating and again to the

hearing sensitive, will appear to buzz and hum. Their sense of smell can be so sensitive that they may feel sick or heave over something a typical person would hardly notice.



Too many sounds, smells, light and movement can push the body into "overload" and these kids can feel very overwhelmed and often want to "flee" all the confusion. Thus shopping trips are often a disaster for these kids.



Touch - another of the senses can also be very sensitive. Someone may accidentally lightly bump a child with autism in a queue and they will think you have deliberately "hit" them! Yet at other times they can have amazing pain tolerance and will not think of telling you

they have a blazing temperature or a chronic ear infection!

An easy and brief description to explain to other children is that these kids' brains are wired differently. Where the normal interaction between the left and right side of the brain occurs - it is quite different for the child with autism. It is as if the wires just don't quite meet and as a result there are lots of problems.



Language can be a real problem. Most kids with autism have hearing tests that come back perfect - it's not the hearing that's the problem it's the processing that is a real battle. If you call across a room to a child it can sound like another language to them - with all the other sensory distractions that are possibly there. If you want to be.....

clearly understood you often need to stand directly in their line of vision and speak in as simple and direct terms as possible.



Kids with autism are concrete thinkers – this means they interpret language literally. It can be very confusing if it was said, “Hold your horses!” when you mean to stop running or something is a “piece of cake” when there’s no dessert in sight. As a result, simple jokes and sarcasm can be completely lost on these kids – they will be very easily “sucked in” and prepared to believe everything you say.

Kids with autism lack the ability to “pre-think of possible danger” before attempting an activity. They can be fearless climbers, fascinated with roads and other dangerous places and simply not think at all the consequences of their actions. A classic example is what happened recently when a 14 yr old boy rode to Sydney from Brisbane, sleeping under bridges, etc, not thinking of possible risks!

These kids love routine and predictability and can get very distressed if they don’t know what’s happening next. This explains their difficulty in play situations where they often like to be the “boss”. Simply because they don’t like change and want to know what’s coming next in a game. With a lot of hard work, however they can be taught how to share and take turns with play ideas, etc. A visual schedule – like a pictorial “list of jobs for the day” can really help to calm these kids and give them a sense of security as they know what’s going to happen next in a day.



When totally overwhelmed or upset these kids can have what is called a “meltdown”. Basically it’s like a tantrum, blow-up or whatever you like to call it, but it’s like a final release of a pressure valve and once it’s started, there is not much you can do. Trying to reason with them when they’ve reached

this stage is impossible. The best thing to do is redirect them to a quiet place as quickly and calmly as possible and let them do a favourite activity to help them get over their “blow-up”. Parents and carers over time will quickly begin to recognise the “rumbling stages”, early signs that a meltdown is coming and will often redirect to a calming activity to prevent the meltdown occurring.



Eventually these kids can learn to “take a break” and calm themselves down if they feel they are getting overwhelmed.

And finally, as with every child – if we focus and build on what these kids can do and not what they can’t do – positive encouragement will do far more than criticism and these kids can blossom and become awesome adults if we give them a chance.

“Don’t DIS my ABILITY!”