

# Dealing with Victims / Witnesses or Suspects who have an Autistic Spectrum Condition

**Remember – no matter how intelligent they may appear they must be treated as a 'Vulnerable Person' as defined by PACE (1984) and a variety of other pieces of legislation. The following and the accompanying other information in this section of the site will explain why.**

Depending on the nature of their autism, the individual may display some of the following characteristics.

## Behaviour

He or she may:

- not recognise police or other emergency services uniforms or vehicles and may not understand what is expected of them; conversely, their association of police with uniforms may be so strong that they will not understand the concept of police in a plain clothes situation
- cover ears or eyes, stare, or look down or away constantly
- walk on tiptoe or in an unusual way
- react to stressful situations with extreme anxiety, which could include pacing, flapping or twirling of hands, self-harming, screaming or groaning, shouting and loss of control. (All of these are a response to fear, confusion and frustration and are an effort to stop the stimuli and retreat into a calm state.)

## Speech

He or she may:

- speak in a monotone voice and/or with unusual or stilted pronunciation; if he/she appears to have normal language; this may be masking his/her actual level of understanding
- repeatedly ask the same question or copy/repeat the last phrase they heard (this is known as echolalia)
- not respond to questions or instructions
- communicate non-verbally; many people with autism cannot speak
- become noisy or agitated if required to deviate from regular routine
- speak obsessively about a topic that is of particular interest to them, but which may have no apparent relevance to the situation.

## Communicating with a person with autism

A person with autism will often find unexpected or unusual situations very difficult.

*The following points will be helpful to professionals throughout the Criminal Justice System when communicating with someone who has the disability.*

### Aim to keep the situation calm

- Do not attempt to stop the person from flapping, rocking or making other repetitive movements as this can sometimes be a self-calming strategy and may subside once things have been explained to them clearly.

- People with autism may carry an object for security, such as a piece of string or paper. Removing it may raise anxiety and cause distress.
- If sirens or flashing lights are being used, turn them off to avoid alarm and distraction.
- If possible, and if the situation is not dangerous or life-threatening, try to avoid touching a person with autism, as they may respond with extreme agitation due to their heightened and acute sensitivity.
- People with autism may have an unusual response to pain and not report or be able to communicate injury. Check the person for any injuries in as non-invasive a way as possible, looking for unusual limb positions (e.g. limping or hanging arm) or other signs, such as abdominal pain.

### **Guidelines for effective communication**

- People with autism often understand visual information better than spoken words. It may be useful to use visual supports/aids, such as drawings or photos, to explain to the person what is happening. If they can read, it may be useful to put your information in writing.
- To prepare the individual, explain clearly the situation that they are in and what the professional will be asking questions about. If you are taking the individual somewhere else, explain clearly where and why to lessen their anxiety.
- Try to avoid shouting at the person with autism.
- Keep language clear, concise and simple: use short sentences and direct commands.
- Allow time for the person to respond. Individuals with autism may take a long time to digest information before answering, so do not move on to another question too quickly.
- Reinforce gestures with a statement to avoid misunderstanding.
- If you know the person's name, use this at the start of each sentence so that they know you are addressing them. Give clear, slow and direct instructions; for example, "Back, get out of the car."
- Avoid using sarcasm, metaphors or irony. People with autism may take things literally, causing huge misunderstandings. Examples of idioms that would cause confusion to someone who interprets language literally are "You're pulling my leg", "Have you changed your mind?" and "I've caught my eye."
- Ensure that questions are direct, clear and focused to avoid confusion. A person with autism may respond to your question without understanding the implication of what they are saying, or they may agree with you simply because they think this is what they are supposed to do. If a person with autism is asked "You didn't do this, did you?" they may repeat the question (known as *echolalia*) or say "No" but if the question is "You did this, didn't you?" they may repeat the question or say "Yes".

### **Responses by the person with autism**

- Do not expect an immediate response to questions or instructions, as the person with autism may need time to process them. Give the person at least ten seconds to respond.
- If a response indicates echolalia (i.e. repetition of the question) it is important not to construe this as insolence: check that you have posed the question clearly enough.

- “ Avoidance of eye contact by the person with autism should not be misconstrued as rudeness or a cause for suspicion.
- “ People with autism may not understand the notion of personal space. They may invade your personal space, or may themselves need more personal space than the average person.

### **Autism recognition cards**

The person with autism may be in possession of a card which indicates and explains their condition. Autism West Midlands & The National Autistic Society (NAS) and other autism organisations issue cards like this, which are the same size as a business card and are designed to be shown as needed if the holder is unable to explain their own condition.

**See the ‘Further help and support’ section of this site for examples of the cards and further information.**