

# Questioning people with autism

**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.**

People with autism are individuals with their own particular ways of relating to others and no two people with autism are likely to display all the characteristics outlined in this guide. Nevertheless, it is important that you are aware of the points below when interviewing a person with autism.

## **Stress and anxiety leading up to the interview**

Be aware that people with autism find changes in routine very difficult to handle. They will certainly be stressed if their routines are disturbed by, for example, being taken to a police station. Even planned events, such as an interview with a solicitor, may be very stressful for them.

An individual may also be extremely anxious in a strange environment, such as a court or waiting room.

Some people with autism are hypersensitive to noise and light, while others are fearful of crowds. They often have difficulty in waiting their turn or understanding social conventions such as queuing. An individual may be unable to tolerate such an experience, their anxiety leading them to become agitated or disruptive. If their anxiety increases they may even lash out. If an individual is in this type of situation, any questioning may be adversely affected.

## **Difficulties in understanding**

People with autism are likely to have difficulty understanding what is said to them, and can struggle to maintain a meaningful two-way conversation; this is even more likely when they are stressed. Even those with seemingly good expressive speech are likely to struggle with non-literal communication such as figures of speech, sarcasm, or jokes. They often take what is said to them completely literally. So, for example, if given an appointment at 2pm they may expect to be seen at precisely that time.

## **Guidance for the interview process**

It may not be possible to gather all the information you need during one interview. It might be necessary to hold several sessions in order to build up familiarity with the individual. If possible, talk to their parents, carers or the professionals involved with them, such as their psychiatrist, to seek advice on the best way to interview them.

Additionally, it may be necessary to seek the advice of a psychologist or social worker who specialises in the field of autism. The support of an appropriate adult for either a child or adult with autism, especially one who has knowledge of the disability, is often essential to help the process move forward. **It is advisable to use someone who knows them and understands their condition as an ‘Appropriate Adult’ and not the Duty Social Worker or other person on an ‘Appropriate Adult Scheme’ list.** On occasion, it may be a good idea to call upon the services of an advocate.

It will be helpful to keep the interview as short as possible. A child with autism may not be able to concentrate for any longer than ten to 15 minutes at the most. An adult may also need more frequent and longer breaks than is usual.

*The following tips will also help you during the interview itself.*

## **Keeping the environment as calm as possible**

- “ The individual may be more relaxed if they are interviewed in a familiar place, with a familiar person present.
- “ If known, explain how long the interview is likely to last and what will happen at the end of the session.
- “ Where court procedures allow, use video links or other adaptations to meet the needs of people with autism who are giving evidence.
- “ Ensure there are no background noises which could provide a distraction during the interview.
- “ Children and some adults with autism often have an attachment to a particular object, such as a piece of string. The child or adult may wish to hold the object or possibly twiddle or flap with it during the interview. Research suggests that sometimes this helps them to concentrate and removing the object may cause the person unnecessary distress.

## **Conducting the interview**

- “ Talk calmly in your natural voice, keeping language as simple and clear as possible. Use only necessary words.
- “ Try not to exaggerate your facial expression or tone of voice as this can be misinterpreted.
- “ Keep gestures to a minimum, as they may be a distraction. If gestures are necessary, accompany them with unambiguous statements or questions that clarify their meaning.
- “ Use the individual's name at the start of each question so that they know they are being addressed.
- “ Cue the individual in to the language you are about to use, preparing them for the instructions or questions that might follow. For example, “John, I am going to ask you a question.”
- “ Give time for the person to respond; don't assume that silence means there is no answer forthcoming.
- “ Avoid open questions: closed questions are more likely to be understood. For example, asking a person with autism to “tell me what you saw yesterday” may be too vague. The individual may not be able to judge exactly what the interviewer needs to know. A better approach would be to say “Tell me what you saw happen in the shopping centre at around 10 o'clock.”
- “ People with autism have a very literal understanding of language. Avoid using irony or sarcasm.
- “ Back up questions with the use of visual aids or supports. People with autism often understand visual information better than words. Consider asking them to draw or write down what happened.

## **Interviewee response**

- “ Allow the individual extra thinking time to respond to each question. People with an ASD often take longer to process information. If there is no response at all, try rephrasing the question. A person with autism is unlikely to be able to inform you when they don't understand what you have asked: be prepared to prompt the individual in order to gather sufficient relevant information.
- “ People with autism may have better expressive language skills than receptive language skills. Be aware that they may not comprehend fully what is said to them. Some people with ASD have echolalia: they may echo and repeat the words of others without understanding the meaning of those words.
- “ Don't expect the individual to necessarily make eye contact during the interview.
- “ Remember that people with autism may speak in a monotone, and/or use very stilted language.
- “ In some situations, people with autism may come across as stubborn or belligerent. Alternatively, they may be over-compliant, agreeing with the interviewer's suggestions or to statements that are untrue. They may not understand the consequences of this action.

## **For those held in custody**

Individuals with autism who are being held in custody must be supported. It is

best practice to follow the advice above when communicating with them and to remember that their disability renders them vulnerable. If left unattended, those held in custody may react by self-harming, which could involve repeated biting or poking of parts of their body or banging their heads against a wall.

Individuals with autism should have access to a professional who understands their disability, can provide advice and explain their needs; an appropriate adult may also be needed during the interview process. Family and carers should be consulted as to the support, care or intervention that the individual requires. **For this reason it is advisable to use someone who knows them and understands their condition as an 'Appropriate Adult' and not the Duty Social Worker or other person on an 'Appropriate Adult Scheme' list.**