Autism and Increased Vulnerability

Having an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) can increase the risk of young people becoming victims of abuse for a number of reasons:

- **Communicating about Abuse**
  - They may find it more difficult to communicate and so struggle to tell or explain if they are abused.
  - They may struggle to initiate a conversation about something that is difficult.
  - They may report abuse in atypical ways and may not be seen as a ‘credible witness’
  - They may interpret things quite literally - not picking up on hidden meanings, tone of voice, sarcasm and unkindness.
  - Idiosyncratic ways of communicating may make it hard for people with ASC to represent themselves. Others (parents, staff) may speak for them.

- **Self Esteem**
  - Abusers might think the person with ASC is less likely to be believed if they tell.
  - People with ASC like to stick to the rules. If they’ve been told not to tell, they won’t tell!
  - Indicators of abuse, such as unusual behaviours may be seen as just the child ‘being autistic’ and ignored...
  - ... And vice versa: autistic behaviours, such as seeking their own company, might be misinterpreted as signs of abuse.

- **Social Risk Factors**
  - People with ASC may be lonely, or lack friends, which makes them vulnerable to being befriended by people who want to do them harm.
  - They may have difficulty understanding and reading other people’s emotions and intentions towards them.

- **Sensory Issues**
  - Feeling overwhelmed by sensory information can impair judgment in potentially risky situations.
  - They may respond differently to things that hurt them, and not experience pain in the same way as other people do.

- **Other People’s Emotions and Intentions**
  - If low self-esteem is a problem, they may think it’s normal, or even OK, for them to be treated badly.
  - Sometimes a person with autism may blame him / herself if others abuse them, because they know their own behaviour can be challenging — they may even think they deserve to be badly treated.

Autism or Abuse? How can you tell?

In your safeguarding training you may have been taught to look out for behaviours that can indicate a child is suffering from abuse. Some of these, such as the child seeming withdrawn or isolated, seeking adult company, being sexually disinhibited, having low self-esteem or self harming, may also be typical of some children with Autism... How can you tell the difference?

Knowing the young person concerned and what is typical behaviour for them, is the key. Maintain a heightened awareness of small changes in their behaviour. Make no assumptions. Listen to what they are telling you and believe them, understand the world from their point of view. Remember that because they are autistic, does not mean a young person might not also be suffering abuse, nor does it mean that they are. If you are unsure, talk to colleagues or to your SENSS Specialist Advisory Teacher about your concerns. It’s always helpful to speak to someone who has met a lot of different children with Autism.
Your school will have clear procedures for safeguarding children guided by the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children’s Board (OSCB). These help you to keep young people safe and you must know and follow these procedures in relation to all children in your school.

To better support children with ASC in carrying out these duties, there are a number of other things you can do.

Work closely with parents: They know their child better than anyone and may be able to explain behaviours that you find unusual. Discuss any concerns with parents at the earliest opportunity.

Remember that parents may be experiencing high levels of stress, because it’s hard work looking after their autistic child - be sensitive and supportive, non-judgemental and open minded.

Always keep the child and their wellbeing at the centre of your thinking and actions. Do not lose sight of their needs in considering the needs of the parents. Keep your focus on keeping the child safe, not on their autism.

Be aware that sometimes parents may have autism themselves, this may or may not be diagnosed, but it can affect the way they behave and how they interpret what you say. Be patient and persistent in your communication with parents.

Be flexible: Always be prepared to adapt your approach to safeguarding to meet the needs and idiosyncrasies of the individual. Adapt your communication to suit the communication style of the child. If they find it easier to talk whilst walking round the playground, don’t expect them to sit in an office and be ‘interviewed’ for example.

Adapt your approaches, be flexible with school rules and procedures if that helps children to behave safely. If a child with autism is unhappy at play time, think about how you can manage play times differently, for example?

Be proactive: Don’t wait until there is a problem before thinking about how to keep young people with ASC in your school safe. Keeping children safe needs to be a proactive process, not a reactive one.

Think about creating safe spaces in the school or lunchtime clubs where play times can be enjoyed, not endured; Think about building a culture in your school shared by children, staff parents and the whole community that accepts and understands difference and does not tolerate bullying or discrimination; Build individual resilience and self - esteem through your curriculum and extra-curricular activities; Strengthen peer relationships, through social skills groups, buddy systems and peer mentoring to build trust and openness in your school;

Teach children to care about each other and create a comfortable ethos where children feel safe, because they trust staff, know that they have a voice and are supported by their peers.

Communication can be very challenging with children and young people who have ASC. In fact, getting it right, where there is a risk of abuse is really important.

Some children can seem very articulate and competent communicators, but still struggle to understand more subtle, but crucial, social aspects of communication such as body language and inference. They may also be very poor at articulating emotions and feelings. Others may have very little or no verbal communication and may have very little or no verbal communication and may be able to explain behaviours or have autism themselves, this may or may not be diagnosed.

While it’s difficult for parents to impose control, they can also be more empathetic and consider the impact of their behaviour on other people? How can we teach them to be more empathetic and consider the impact of their behaviour on other people? How can we teach them to be more empathetic and consider the impact of their behaviour on other people?

Can people with ASC be abusers too?

Some behaviours associated with Autism may be seen as abusive to other people - they may appear forceful to the point of bullying or may be violent towards others due to their own difficulties anxiety. It is important to understand these behaviours and explore their causes and the intentions of the young person. Can they help the way in which they behave? How can we teach them to be more empathetic and to consider the impact of their behaviour on other people? How can we teach them to be more empathetic and to consider the impact of their behaviour on other people?

If someone with ASC is accused of bullying, for example, explore what is happening carefully to see if this is the case: Do they have enough understanding of the social context for this to be considered bullying? Do they have the social skills to be able to interact more appropriately with their peers? Might they be copying behaviours they themselves have experienced or seen? Do they mean to bully? Or do they just need help to make and sustain positive friendships?

If you are concerned about this, talk to your SENSS advisory teacher about how Social Stories and Peer Support initiatives can help.

Of course it is possible that young people with ASC may also be abusive, and the impact of intentionally abusive behaviour on the victim is no less severe just because it was perpetrated by a young person with ASC. As in all cases of child on child abuse - the needs of the victim and the needs of the abuser both need careful and separate consideration.