

A-JOURNAL

A Journal Celebrating Autism and Effective Autism Practice

In this issue:

- Reflections on 'Autistic Masking and Mental Health' with Dr Hannah Belcher
- Supporting transitions for autistic pupils
- Reflections from our first Neurodiversity Network
- A visit to the Autism Show
- Sensory Processing Differences



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★ Welcome back to A-Journal

Hello and welcome to the second edition of A-Journal. We were saddened by the [findings](#) that only 14% of Secondary School teachers have received more than half a day's training on autism. We created A-Journal to highlight and share effective practice and strategies for supporting autistic young people, with the aim of making schools and society more inclusive places. In this issue, we look at autistic masking, managing transitions over the summer break and feedback from our first Neurodiversity Network. As always, you can get in touch with ideas or feedback at: autismsupport@springfields.wilts.sch.uk

★ Who we are

The Springfields Academy is a large special school for children with autism and communication and interaction needs. We are a day school for children aged 5-19 and all our learners have an EHCP. Our aspiration is to enable pupils to lead safe, independent lives. As part of our therapy first culture, all pupils benefit from the expertise of our in-house therapy team. Our talented therapy team work alongside our teachers and autism support workers to ensure that all children receive appropriate and bespoke support. We are proud of the quality of education our learners receive and we were awarded an Ofsted 'Good' rating in March 2022. In June 2022, we were visited by the National Autistic Society who designated us with the Advanced Autism Specialist Award. Pupils receive a curriculum personalised to their needs and we promote achievement both academically, socially and emotionally. You can learn more about us through this [video](#).

★ Neurodiversity in the Workplace

We're delighted to have been asked by Deirdre Fitzpatrick to write a guest post for the SWALSS Leadership Blog ([the South and West Association of Leaders in Special Schools](#)). We can't give too much away before publication, but we'll be discussing:

- the figures concerning autistic employment and why this matters
- why we want to become a neurodiversity inclusive employer
- our journey so far- what we've done and who we're spoken with
- what we've learnt and implemented
- what we're going to do next

Look out for the finished blog in the next edition of A-Journal.

Coming up in Issue 3: Winter 2023

- Highlights from our second Neurodiversity Network.
- Neurodiversity in the workplace- our journey towards being more inclusive.
- Supporting autistic children in the classroom.
- Planning for A-Fest 2024

If you can't wait and fancy some wider reading, then try: [Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers](#) Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Lester, Sasson, and Hand. *Autism in Adulthood*, 2021, 3:1, 18-29.

Thanks for reading A-Journal!

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★ Supporting Transitions With Autistic Pupils by Nicola Whitcombe

The end of one academic year and the beginning of another, sandwiched by a summer holiday can cause anxiety for autistic learners and their families. **Nicola Whitcombe**, Deputy Headteacher at The Springfields Academy, provides ways that we can support autistic learners with these changes.

One thing in life is certain- change and transition is going to happen. In education, change and uncertainty is prevalent throughout the summer term as we look to a long summer holiday and a new timetable in September. Change and transitions are anxiety provoking for many autistic individuals, so what can we do as educationalists, carers and therapists to ensure the experience of change and transitions is positive? What can we do to provide a secure foundation and positive associations to build on in the next academic year?

I recommend implementing the 3P approach: 'Plan & Prepare, and Personalise'. This approach ensures that the student and their support systems are actively involved in the change process, leading to a successful transition experience.

Plan & Prepare:

Planning transitions carefully is crucial to reduce anxiety. It is important to ensure that individuals are adequately prepared while addressing their specific needs. You could try:

- Using person-centred planning tools, such as 'PATHS', to ensure that personalised goals are set which inform the transition process. These goals should be realistic and achievable but not limiting. Think aspirational!
- Co-ordinating the right support team around the individual to ensure they get the right support, enablement and advice. This could include family members, education professionals, health professionals, therapists and/or community support.
- Liaising with key staff that the pupils will be working with in their new class or setting is vital. Share important information about the child in a transition meeting. It may also be appropriate to have a meeting with the individual, their family and wider professionals so that everyone's view and voice is heard. This would also help inform short and long term plans.
- Share information about the transition early and ensure it is communicated in an accessible way for the individual. Remember verbal language does not have permanence and is therefore harder to process. This means that information can be difficult to retain. Share information through the use of visuals, videos and photographs that the individual can return to at a interval that suits their needs.

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- Plan in time to 'practice' and 'experience' what the transition may be like ahead of the real event. This could include visits, taster experiences, meeting peers and staff or travel training. Visits and experiences may need to be phased, for example visiting the outside of a setting, before planning a separate visit to go inside and meet key people.
- Consider the social knowledge the pupil needs to ensure a successful transition. What coaching or development opportunities need to be planned into their programme to cater for this knowledge growth and development?

Personalise

"When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism"
Dr Stephen Shore

Every autistic person is an individual with their own unique strengths and challenges and it is important these are considered and catered for within transition planning. When personalising the enablement for the pupil you are working with consider:

Environmental factors

- How is the environment in the new classroom/setting going to affect the individual?
- How are the environmental experiences leading up to or around the transition destination going to impact on the individual? E.g. transport to school or navigating around the school environment.

Communication factors

- How does the individual need to be supported to understand any communication regarding transition?
- How does the individual need to be supported to communicate about the transition and to communicate once they have transitioned?

Emotional Regulation factors

- Change and transition are anxiety provoking and this anxiety can present in a variety of ways. What does the individual need to stay grounded and emotionally regulate?

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Reflection:

- Every transition is a unique and individual experience, our knowledge of the individual within this process is key to its success. Draw on all the information you have, speak to the individual, include the family, and gather information from previous staff/settings.
- At the core of the process is a person who has the right to be authentically themselves, authentically autistic and successful. Our responsibility is to remove barriers to ensure this can be achieved.

Resources to support transitions:

- [Paths Person Centred Planning Tools](#)
- [Brain in Hand](#) – Self Management and Support System
- [Supporting learners with autism during transition](#) – AET Resource

★ A-Fest Online 2023: Autistic Masking and Mental Health with Dr. Hannah Belcher, King's College London

Nicola Brooks, Lead for Staff Development and Partnerships, attended Hannah's A-Fest session on 'Autistic Masking and Mental Health'. Here are her key takeaways.

Dr. Hannah Belcher is a lecturer at King's College London with an interest in autism, mental health and user-led research. Hannah was diagnosed with 'Asperger's Syndrome' in 2012, at the age of 23. She is the author of 'Taking Off the Mask', published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Masking:

- All people mask in some way.
- Many autistic people hide autistic traits in order to appear neurotypical e.g. suppressing stims, forcing eye contact, hiding special interests.
- Autistic people may mask to compensate for autistic traits e.g. girls may copy their peers and follow social scripts to help them 'fit in'.
- Depth of masking can vary- it can be shallow or deep. Shallow e.g. learning to laugh at a joke. Deep e.g. studying why jokes are considered funny.

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Research suggests that:

- Hall et al. (2019) autistic people use masking strategies more significantly than non-autistic people.
- Autistic people are often socialised to encourage more neurotypical social behaviours.
- Girls may be more likely to mask. This may be because of gender socialisation e.g. girls may be encouraged to share, consider the feelings of others and to talk quietly. Executive functioning may have a role e.g. girls may find it easier to remember and use social scripts.
- Constantly self-monitoring and adapting to different social situations uses mental resources and is exhausting (Livingston et al., 2018).
- Masking can deny your true authentic autistic identity e.g. hiding your special interests hides who you are. Pelton and Cassidy (2017) suggest this may increase suicidality in autistic people.

How can we reduce masking? More importantly- should we?

- It is important that autistic people can be their authentic selves.
- It can be hard to stop masking as it can happen from a very young age.
- If the behaviour isn't dangerous or unsafe then it doesn't need to be changed.
- Don't label behaviours as wrong if they are not harming anyone. Are they problem behaviours or differences? e.g. something being embarrassing isn't a reason for it to stop. Loud humming doesn't really harm anyone. If it is a behaviour which is embarrassing then this is something that the individual experiencing the embarrassment needs to deal with.

Hannah conducted a study that explored the judgements people make about each other. Non-autistic people rated down videos of autistic people, even those identified as high camouflaging or high masking individuals. When autistic people judged other autistic people the judgement was more positive. We therefore need to increase society's understanding of atypical individuals.

Social Scripts

- Social scripts can be helpful when navigating unknown social situations. e.g. What will happen when I get there? What do I do to get ready?
- However, these shouldn't be a script of what to say as these scripts can be another form of masking.

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Special Interests

- Don't be unduly concerned about hyperfixation-special interest can be mechanisms of safety.
- Don't deny special interests e.g. don't use these as a punishment by taking them away. Use special interests as a motivator.
- Special interest can often help with careers.

Difference, not deficit

- Don't try to change or judge autistic people.
- Provide autistic role models and opportunities to socialise with other autistic peers.
- Create a sense of normalcy being around other autistic people e.g. autism friendly film screenings.
- Don't focus on deficits. How have other autistic individuals used their strengths?
- Practise unmasking by providing safe spaces.
- View autism and being neurodivergent as a strength.

★ Visit to the Autism Show- June 2023

On Friday 23rd June 2023, four colleagues from Springfields attended the Autism Show at the NEC in Birmingham. You can read their learning and reflections below.

Linda

I enjoyed listening to speakers talk about their “lived experiences” as autistic individuals. They explained the challenges they faced and the strategies they used and this was very powerful in comprehending how exhausting it is for an autistic person to just get through their day, and what “masked” behaviour might look like.

As a teacher, it has helped me reassess my expectations of some children in my class, especially those with severe sensory sensitivities. Our focus is often on getting a child to engage in a curriculum activity, but I also need to be aware how difficult it is for some children to just be in the class and in education.



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A speaker also spoke about the 5 Fs: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Flop and Fawn and what these might look like. I'd not heard of 'fawning' before, which is to overcompensate as a means to appear competent when someone is masking. Also the impact of anxiety – it often manifests in this order:

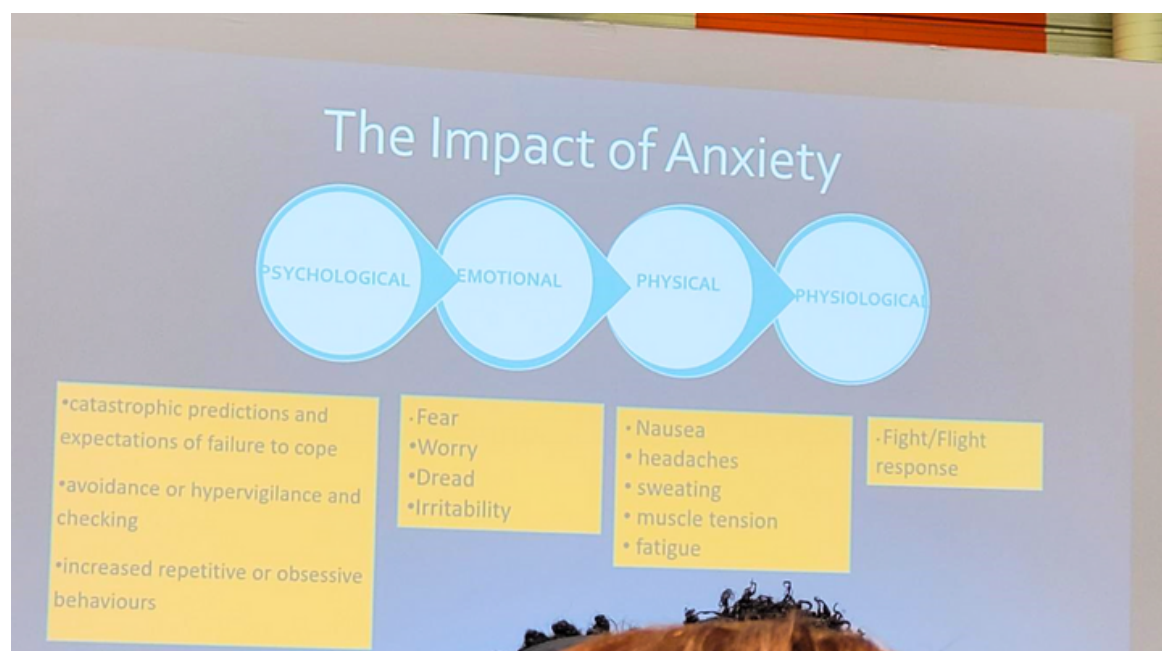
Psychological – Emotional – Physical – Physiological

If anxiety is not well-managed, it can result in catastrophic predictions, avoidance, hypervigilance and increased obsessive and repetitive behaviours.

Maxine

I had the pleasure of attending The Autism Show at the end of June and it was great! There were stalls offering different products and services, theatres where I could listen to leading autism professionals and learn new strategies and approaches. I also particularly enjoyed gaining insight from autistic adults.

One of the talks I accessed was on the topic of how anxiety can affect autistic students and management strategies for this. I found this particularly helpful as it is the topic I am in the middle of writing an assignment on for my NASENCo qualification. It was useful to hear how the amygdala in the brain is the part that protects you from danger or perceived danger, but what it can't tell you is whether or not that danger is real or not. This could explain why some people who suffer anxiety can catastrophise situations as their brains cannot tell them that what they are perceiving to be dangerous is not actually a 'real' danger.



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Laura

I attended a session called 'What's sensory got to do with it?' by Jignasha Button, Independent Occupational Therapist/Sensory Integration Practitioner, and Specialist Occupational Therapist at Wider Ambition. This session focused on understanding the link between sensory issues and distressed/unregulated behaviour in the classroom. We started by exploring how our senses underpin every interaction that we have with the world. We experience both external sensory information that is coming into our bodies and internal sensory feedback. We all have a sensory profile and different sensory preferences.

How we process sensations affects our ability to function in life. Sensory integration is the process by which our body receives sensory information, makes sense of it and then tells our bodies how to respond. Sensory Processing Differences are now part of the diagnostic criteria for autism and many autistic individuals will have these.

Our nervous system can be under-responsive to sensory input (hypo-reactive) or over-responsive (hyper-reactive). Under-responsive individuals may not notice sensory input e.g. that something is hot or cold. They may crave strong sensations or seek out sensory input to help their body feel right. Over-responsive individuals can be easily overwhelmed by sensory input and may be extremely sensitive to changes in noise, light or smell. They may find sensory input painful or uncomfortable and may require sunglasses or ear defenders. These children may try to get away from the uncomfortable environment. Alternatively, they may try and take control by managing the situation or environment. This might help support them to manage the things that they cannot control.

Sensory discomfort can create a vicious circle. This is because sensory discomfort can lead to distressed or dysregulated behaviour which can lead to increased avoidance of the sensory input (e.g. the classroom or school site) or escalating behaviours over time. This can contribute to emotionally based school avoidance.

Points of reflection:

- Try re-framing your view of dysregulated behaviour- could it be sensory needs?
- Look for the sensory triggers- consider the sensory environments and interactions that may have led up to the behaviour.
- Even if a pupil is quiet they could be masking internal discomfort.
- Help young people to understand their sensory preferences. Model this by talking about your sensory preferences.
- Provide safe sensory spaces and calm zones.
- Make reasonable adjustments e.g. uniform, lunch times.

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★ Neurodiversity Network- Launch Meeting June 2023

On Wednesday 18th June we hosted our first Neurodiversity Network as part of our commitment to Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging. We want to champion the neurodiverse community, ensuring that all neurotypes feel valued, accepted and understood. Below you can find a summary of each speaker and their lived experience of being neurodivergent. Thanks again to all of our speakers for sharing their stories.

Emma

Emma's children were diagnosed with SEND when they were young. She went into teaching to help children (like her own) who don't fit easily into the system. Emma was attracted to schools with high SEND needs and trained as an autism specialist teacher. She set up a Resource Base to ease pressure on mainstream schools.

Emma studied for a Masters in Autism Education from Birmingham University. She first thought that she might be autistic when she was sitting in a lecture by Uta Frith. Emma recalls how there were tears in her eyes because for the first time ever at the age of 36 she thought that "there was somebody else out there a little bit like me". Autism has since become Emma's specialist interest.

Getting a diagnosis was transformational for Emma as it helped her learn more about herself. First of all she found it difficult to say "I'm autistic", but she needed that label because she came across as articulate. She was a high-achieving female and was often told that she didn't look autistic. She didn't match what doctors and other medical practitioners expected to see. Consequently, Emma spent a long time masking and was finally diagnosed at 47 years old.

Emma feels comfortable telling her workplace that "there are some things I need to do a job." However, she says that "if people don't like something about you they often blame it on your autism. When someone describes me as 'high functioning', what they mean is that my autism doesn't affect them". She is now more confident and knows what adjustments she needs in the workplace. Emma finds it difficult to get things down on paper. She struggles with executive function and what the finished product might look like. Emma prefers to use a blank notebook as she doesn't like it when she goes out of the lines.

Emma now feels able to say, "I'm feeling overwhelmed, can you break it down for me? Or can you repeat that in a different way?". Emma also asks for a written copy of interview questions so that she can read them whilst people ask them. "Just because you're fairly articulate doesn't mean you're necessarily taking everything on board." Emma says that "Autism isn't a disorder, it's a difference".

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In Emma's line of work as a Trust safeguarding lead being autistic can be a strength. Emma is able to detach herself from a situation and look at things logically- she's not led by her emotions.

Reflecting on her childhood, Emma says "I was terrified of the world around me as a child. At school I was quiet and shy, but bubbly at home. I verged on being a selective mute. I experienced autistic shutdown- the words were inside me, but they wouldn't come out."

Helen

Helen is dyslexic. She says this means she "has a brain like a goldfish and needs to write things down". Helen can have a whole conversation, and yet, not remember anything. She often says the wrong word or forgets things. Helen will get words round the wrong way, e.g. "pass the table" instead of "pass the salt". Helen was diagnosed as dyslexic whilst studying A-Level Maths. She struggled with word problems. She could draw the diagram required or complete the Maths, but struggled to read the words in the question. This affected Helen's mental health. She felt exhausted, frustrated and tearful.

Helen reads because she has to. She jokes that if there was a film about The Children and Families Act then she'd watch it. Helen feels that there is pressure on children to 'love reading', but for Helen, "reading is my nemesis". Helen suggests that schools try to take some of that pressure off- that reading can be functional, you don't always need to love it.

Dyslexia affects Helen's verbal processing and how she processes sound. Helen finds it hard to hold onto information and says that English spelling is "tricky". Learning is also difficult. You have to get that verbal information into the brain, process it and file it. It's difficult to maintain concentration whilst that happens.

Megan

Megan was diagnosed with autism as a teenager. Neither Megan or her family knew what autism was when she was diagnosed. It took Megan a year to get diagnosed and there were lots of steps. After assessment Megan was told "we think it's quite obvious she's on the spectrum". Looking back, Megan and her family can now see indications- she went out for social skills classes at school and interventions where she was told "you can't say that" or "you can't ask that". Megan was very rigid with how things needed to be. Megan described the importance of having breakfast, lunch and dinner in that order.

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★ Neurodiversity Network- Launch Meeting June 2023

Before a Sunday dinner (served at lunchtime), Megan would have to have a little lunch of a sandwich first.

Before diagnosis, Megan had no real idea of who she was or why she didn't fit in. Megan says she never had any friends at school. She says she only has two friends now, but she is happy with that. She understands that she likes things how she likes things: "I don't need to fit in. I don't need lots of friends".

Megan came for a job interview at Springfields when she was 18. Megan wanted to work with autistic children because she felt she didn't get enough support when she was growing up. At Springfields there is "so much support available". Megan says that "working with autistic teenagers is amazing". Reflecting on being autistic, Megan says "it's great. There are so many things I love. I remember everything. I argue with my sisters, but I remember everything correctly and they don't". However, it can be hard. Megan reflects on the difficulty of "telling your grandparents that you don't want a hug or don't want to be touched". Now that she is older, Megan better understands what she needs, but ends by saying "even if you're not diagnosed, you're still autistic".

Marc

Marc has ADHD. He describes how he finds it difficult to remember things and that he gets easily distracted. Buzzer, in particular, distracts him. Marc also has anxiety- he explains that if you have ADHD, there is a high chance that you will also have anxiety. Marc speaks about the effect of having anxiety and how he used to struggle with sitting and eating with people. He reflects on the societal constraints of phobias. Phobias of flying and spiders are fine, phobias of going to a restaurant with people are less socially acceptable. Marc questions whether this is "our problem, or society's problem".

Marc was diagnosed later in life. He heard someone speak about being an adult with ADHD and how this manifested- blurting out, being impulsive, having no filter. Marc decided to pursue a diagnosis of ADHD. He recalls that he was told "it could take 5 years for a diagnosis". He responded, "I've got ADHD, I can't wait 5 minutes, let alone 5 years". Marc recalls a set of 50 questions to answer as part of the diagnostic process. He jokes that "if you got to the 50th question then there was a screen that said, 'you do not have ADHD'."

Marc ends by reflecting that other people's brains don't work like his. However, he struggles with sleeping, stating "sometimes it's rubbish having ADHD - it's not always a superpower".

Thank you for reading A-Journal. We'll return in December.