

# Autism Spectrum Disorders

A general overview

# True or False

- ▶ **The term autism is relatively new.**
- ▶ Autism was first described by scientist Leo Kranner in 1943, but the earliest description of a child now known to have had autism was written in 1799
- ▶ **Autism is a mental health disorder.**
- ▶ Autism is a neurological disorder. Studies of the people with autism have revealed abnormalities in brain structure and neurotransmitter levels
- ▶ **Autism is not a result of poor parenting**
- ▶ In the 1950s, there was an assumption that autism was caused by emotionally distant or cold parents. Though the exact cause of autism has not been determined, it is now firmly established that autism has nothing to do with parenting.
- ▶ **Individuals with autism are violent**
- ▶ Though there have been recent news stories relating autism to violence, violent acts from autistic individuals usually arise from sensory overload or emotional distress, and it is unusual for individuals with autism to act violently out of malice or pose any danger to society.
- ▶ **Individuals with autism are able or willing to form meaningful social relationships.**
- ▶ Though many individuals with autism have difficulty with social interaction, they can have close social relationships, fall in love and have children
- ▶ **All individuals with autism have savant abilities.**
- ▶ While there is a higher prevalence of savant abilities among those with autism, only about 10 percent of individuals with autism exhibit savant abilities. Some have what are called “splinter skills,” meaning skills in one or two areas that are above their overall performance abilities.

# Some Facts

- ▶ Autism is a, lifelong and disabling condition. Without the right support, it can have a profound - sometimes devastating - effect on individuals and families.
- ▶ Autism is much more common than many people think. There are around 700,000 people in the UK with autism - that's more than 1 in 100. If you include their families, autism touches the lives of 2.7 million people every day.
- ▶ About 40% of children with autism do not speak. About 25%-30% of children with autism have some words at 12 to 18 months of age and then lose them. Others might speak, but not until later in childhood
- ▶ Autism greatly varies from person to person (no two people with autism are alike)

# Some more facts

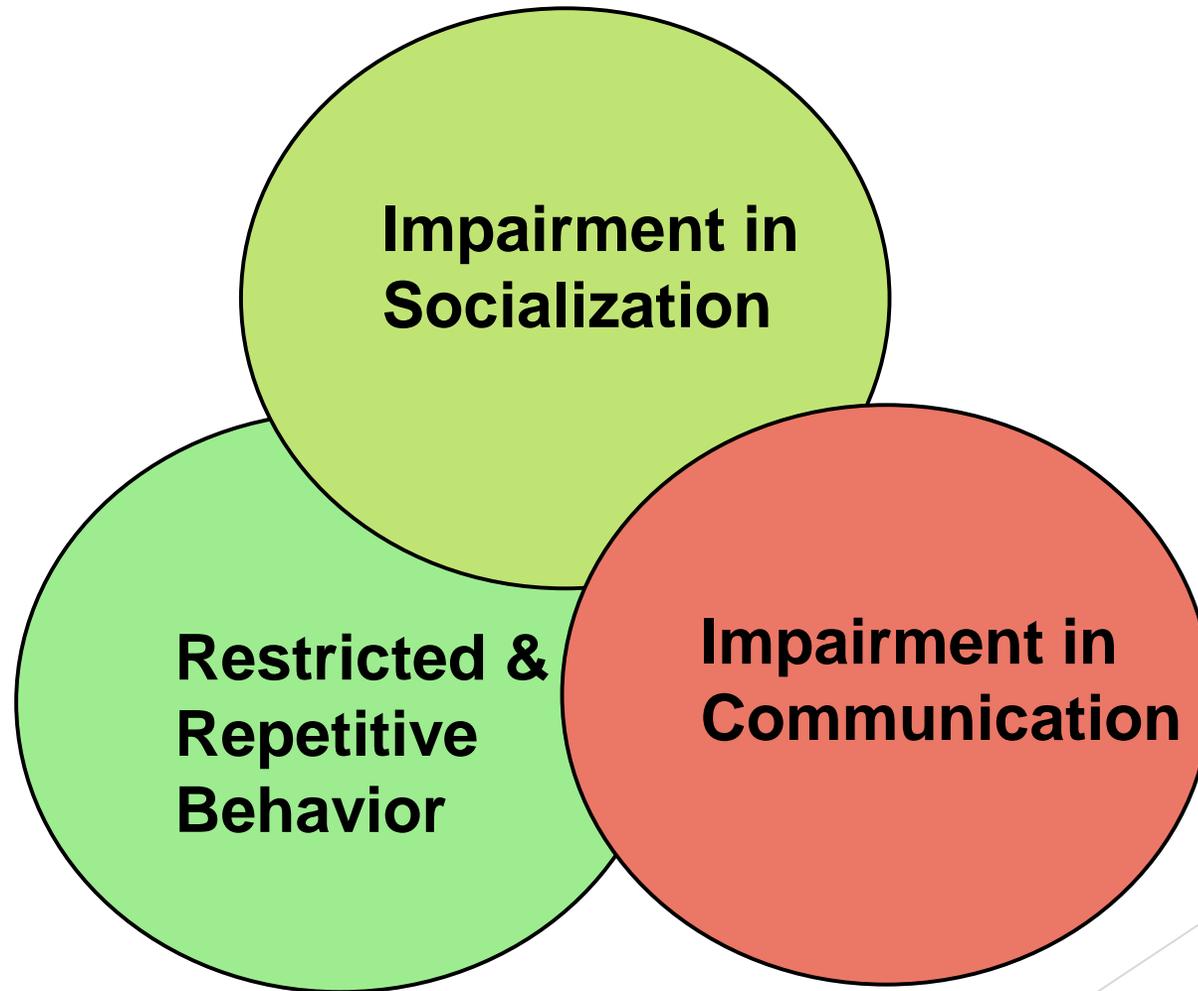
- ▶ Autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder, yet most underfunded
- ▶ Children with autism do progress - early intervention is key
- ▶ Autism is treatable, not a hopeless condition

# Task

- ▶ Everybody fold/cross your arms
- ▶ Now fold them the other way
- ▶ Stay like this for the rest of the session

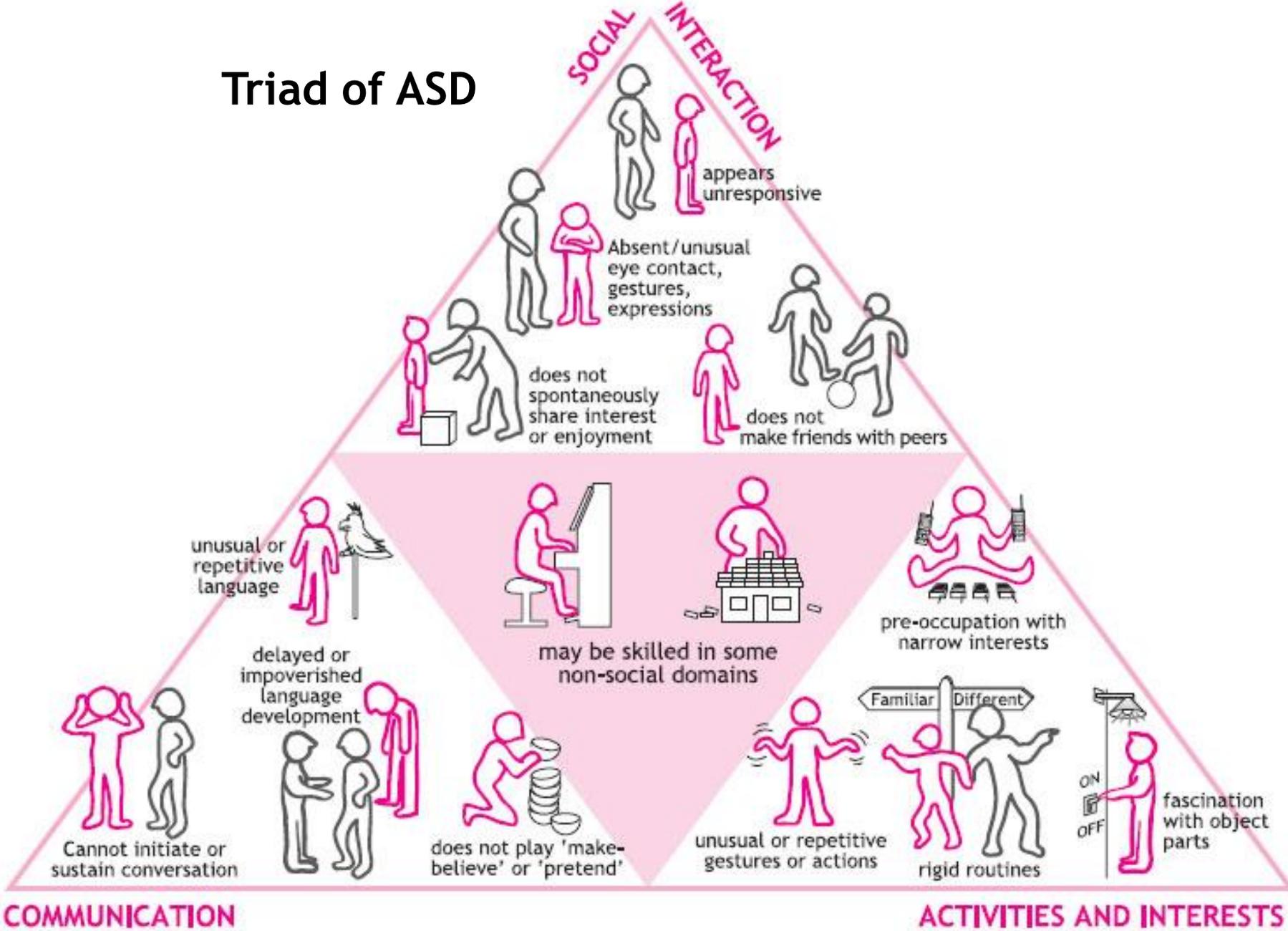
This task is to demonstrate a feeling of being uncomfortable and to point out that children with ASD may feel like this in many situations. Particularly when a behaviour is being challenged or modified.

# What is Autism



START - 2011

# Triad of ASD



# Impairment in Socialization

**Lack of**

shared attention

Interactive play

Concern for others

Empathy/apathy

# Impairment in communication

- Language delay
- Minimal language, may even be mutism
- Lack of gestures, signs or mime. Finds copying non-verbal signs difficult
- May experience echolalia
- Communication can be literal

# Restrictive and Repetitive Behaviour

- Play may be restricted to a few specific themes that are relevant to them
- Can be repetitive or stereotypical
- Can have a lack of imaginativeness and creativity.

# Managing Challenging behaviour

‘... behaviour that challenges - whether it is a challenge to our understanding, our own well-being or a child’s or else to our ability to carry out our responsibilities as parents or professionals.’

(Whitaker 2001: 4)

# Sensory Processing

Lots of people on the autism spectrum report differences in the way their senses work.

It can be hard to work out exactly what a person's sensory issues are, because each person will experience things differently and respond in different ways. And remember that everyone's tolerance levels are affected by their wellbeing, so when we are tired, ill, run down, worried or stressed we might not be as tolerant of sensory stimuli as when we are feeling good.

Autistic people can experience fluctuations in their sensory processing, so it is very hard to be accurate about what is going on:

Sometimes when other kids spoke to me I would scarcely hear, then sometimes they sounded like bullets. (White) Hearing gets louder sometimes...

Things seem suddenly closer sometimes. Sometimes things get suddenly brighter (Oliver) Sometimes, different sensory perceptions can cause pain, distress, anxiety, fear or confusion.

This can result in 'challenging behaviour' as someone desperately tries to block out or remove themselves from unwanted stimuli:

By triggering adrenalin rushes in a state of information overload, touch and bright light and sound can become so intensely sharp that it becomes natural to avoid them. (Williams)

Some of the most common differences are: Sensitivity, (over or under sensitive) Sensory overload, Gestalt perception, Fragmented perception, Delayed perception, Distorted perception, Sensory shutdowns and Compensation

# Importance of visual Symbols

- ▶ “I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me...when somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures... One of the most profound mysteries of autism has been the remarkable ability of most autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills while performing so poorly at verbal skills.” (Grandin, 1995. p19)

# PECS

PECS begins by teaching an individual to give a picture of a desired item to a “communicative partner”, who immediately honors the exchange as a request. The system goes on to teach discrimination of pictures and how to put them together in sentences. In the more advanced phases, individuals are taught to answer questions and to comment.