

Succeeding with SEND series



Focus on Autism Q&A

All the answers in this questionnaire were answered by either Dr Calum Hartley, professor at Lancaster University or Mollie Lee, an Autistic student at Lancaster University who participated in our [focus on Autism video](#).

EXPERT PROFILE



Dr Calum Hartley, Lecturer in Psychology at Lancaster University

An internationally-recognised expert in autism with research focusing on how this disorder impacts children's symbolic communication.

Calum was awarded his PhD in 2014 which investigated how minimally verbal children with autism understand pictures and words. In 2016, he was awarded a Future Research Leaders Fellowship by the Economic and Social Research Council to profile how children with autism identify, retain, and generalise the meanings of words. Calum is currently supervising several PhD projects exploring this topic. He is also interested in aspects of social cognition, including sharing and ownership, and is involved in a long-running outreach project ('Science Hunters') that uses Minecraft to introduce science to children with special educational needs.

For more information about Calum's publications, please visit his university [web page](#).

STUDENT PROFILE



Mollie Lee, Autistic student at Lancaster University

Mollie Lee, is a 21 year old post-graduate psychology student at Lancaster University studying developmental disorders. She was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at 17, when she was already interested in psychology and atypical development which she now gets to pursue.

Questions answered by Dr Calum Hartley of Lancaster University

How can I help an autistic child improve their speech and social skills?

This question is quite tricky to answer without knowing more about the child's communication skills and the interventions they have already received. Working with a Speech and Language Therapist would probably be beneficial. Also, I'd recommend taking advantage of the child's interests. If there is an activity that they really enjoy, they may be motivated to initiate interactions in order to engage in this activity. They may be willing to talk about the activity or during it. This would be a good opportunity to practice verbal communication and it may be possible to build vocabulary during this interaction.

I have recently completed a dyslexia diagnostic assessment for a mature HE student who screened high also for ASD. I am struggling to decide if she has dyslexia with ASD or just ASD and am keen to carry out more research into this.

Dyslexia can co-occur with autism spectrum disorder. I'd recommend reading the following article:

Hendren, R. L., Haft, S. L., Black, J. M., White, N. C., & Hoeft, F. (2018). Recognizing psychiatric comorbidity with reading disorders. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 9, 101. It can be accessed for free [here](#).

Question answered by Mollie Lee, student at Lancaster University with ASD.

How can I support a non-binary teenager with ASD?

My advice would be to encourage them to find other people who share their experience. Being non-binary (or any part of the lgbtq+ community) can be an isolating experience, non-binary representation is low in all areas, and autism can feel isolating, so it is important for them to know that they are not alone in their experience.

Some specifics to consider: things like gender expression and sensory issues may overlap in confusing ways in regards to clothing (e.g. gendered uniforms,

gendered clothing they wish to wear but struggle with how it feels physically) so an environment where comfort is prioritised over the “correct” things to wear or ways to wear them could be helpful.

They also may not be able to pick up on whether someone is being curious about their identity or making fun of them and may require help to tell the difference.

But each individual has different needs, all you can do is ask.

Each year I support increasing numbers of young people who are on the autistic spectrum who have trouble navigating their way through puberty, exam stress, social media pressures and sexual identity. What can mainstream secondary schools be doing better to meet their needs?

Mainstream secondary schools wanting to better meet these needs should ask the students, with no negative consequences for answering and lots of time to think about it. Each specific school will have rules that cause distress.

However, one thing that would help in most education settings is an environment that is more welcoming of differences. The narrative in classrooms is often an assumption that there is a single point of view, but with acknowledgements of differences within the students in the classroom it should help autistic students to feel more seen, and ideally build tolerance in non-autistic students. Don't take for granted that everyone in a given classroom sees things the same way.

High school is a hard time for most students with everything mentioned in this question, I think the key difference is that some things neurotypical students may learn intuitively you have to teach autistic students explicitly. If you stop assuming something is “common knowledge” you are on a better path to help your autistic students.

[**View our Autism resources**](#)