

Supporting Your Infant on the Autism Spectrum



Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (known as ASD, autism and what was previously known as Asperger's syndrome) is a neurodevelopmental condition. The key features are difficulties with social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour. Symptoms are usually present in early development, although sometimes it is diagnosed when the child is older. Every infant is unique and has different strength and difficulties.

Communication

A lot of infants on the autism spectrum have delayed language development or language regression, where they begin to use less verbal language than they did previously. It can be difficult to predict how their language will develop over time but there is a lot you can do to support your infant's communication. Sign-based language, such as Makaton, as well as using symbols, can be used to maximise your infant's communication ability. You can also help your infant to understand you by speaking in clear, short sentences and using simple language.

Structure

Infants on the autism spectrum often benefit from a regular routine and can struggle when there are changes from their normal routine. One strategy to help support older children is to create a visual timetable for your child, with images representing different activities. It is also important to give your infant adequate time to transition between activities if they struggle with this. One strategy is to give notice before an activity finishes and to let your infant know what will happen next to allow them to adjust to the transition.

Sensory

A lot of infants on the autism spectrum can be sensitive to a variety of things, including particular smells, textures or sounds. Every infant is unique so it can be helpful to keep note of when your infant seems more upset than usual and to try to think of any potential triggers. Although it can sometimes be difficult to avoid all triggers, some examples of ways to avoid this is using ear defenders or looking at clothing brands which make children's clothes without internal labels. Some infants will also find certain sounds and textures soothing, such as a particular song or soft teddy, which may help to calm them when they are struggling.

Interests

Your infant may have particular things that interest them, such as specific toys, music or other unusual items. They may like to organise these or collect specific things. These interests can change as your child gets older. While these interests may be unusual or very focussed, they are often things your child will gain a lot of enjoyment from.

Everyone is Unique!

Remember, every infant is unique and what works for one child may not work for another. What is important is to pay attention to your infant and what does and does not work for them, what their individual strengths are and what areas they find challenging and may need more support with.

Support

Remember to look after yourself too. If you are struggling, reach out for support from friends and family, local support groups or a healthcare practitioner. You can also find resources to help look after yourself in the Wellbeing Garden of the Butterfly Baby Club.