

# Exams

## Guidelines for parents and teachers of young people with autism spectrum disorders

Exams are a time of anxiety for all pupils but especially those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, there is plenty that parents and teachers can do to help. This guide relates to secondary school-aged pupils and has advice on:

- › why exam time can be difficult for pupils with an ASD
- › how to plan revision and study leave
- › how to prepare for exams and the change in routine they bring
- › special arrangements that can be put in place for exams.

### What is an autism spectrum disorder?

An autism spectrum disorder – which includes autism and Asperger syndrome – is a lifelong developmental disability. The word ‘spectrum’ is used because the condition affects people in very different ways.

Some pupils with an ASD have accompanying learning disabilities. Others have average or above average intelligence but may struggle with more subjective subjects such as English; processing information and instructions; planning; and coping with the school environment.

"James was a pupil with an autism spectrum disorder. In a school English exam a question read 'Can you describe the main characteristics of Macbeth's personality?' James simply answered 'Yes', because he could."

## Difficulties for pupils with an ASD in exams

Many pupils with an ASD are academically able, but will have difficulties with exams because:

- › they feel anxious
- › they do not understand why they need to sit an exam
- › they do not understand exam questions
- › they have sensory issues and may not cope well with, for example a large exam hall
- › they have difficulty staying ‘on task’.



Accept difference. Not indifference.



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### Anxiety

Many people with an ASD rely on structure and routine to cope in an unpredictable world. Exams, which are new and different and mean a change in routine, can cause great anxiety. It helps if teachers can explain when exams will take place, how pupils will be preparing for them and what happens on the day.

Similarly, unstructured time – such as study leave – can be difficult but there is plenty teachers and parents can do to help. See the 'Revision and study leave' section for details.

It is also worth mentioning that pupils with an ASD can be very hard on themselves and unrealistic about their performance, as well as worrying about results.

### Motivation

Sometimes pupils with an ASD cannot see the point in sitting an exam: they know that they have the knowledge and cannot understand why they have to put it on paper.

Teachers can help by explaining the point behind exams: that having qualifications shows other people – such as employers – that you have a knowledge of certain subjects and are good at things, for example English and maths.

## Understanding exam questions

James was a pupil with an ASD. In a school English exam a question read 'Can you describe the main characteristics of Macbeth's personality?' James simply answered 'Yes', because he could.

People with an ASD can take things literally, and may not understand open-ended questions.

If we take the exam question above as an example, James was unable to infer from it that he should write about Macbeth. The question may have been better phrased like this: 'Describe the main characteristics of Macbeth's personality'. It might also help to say how much pupils should write, for example between 400-500 words.

If you are setting tests in school, you could look at how questions are phrased: are they likely to be understood by pupils with an ASD?

Before pupils sit public or external national exams, it will help to look at old exam questions and talk about how they would answer them. Are they interpreting the questions correctly?

### Sensory issues

Pupils with an ASD often feel overwhelmed by the size and unfamiliarity of big exam halls. Strip lighting, noise (even background noises that most of us can filter out), smells, a teacher walking up and down – these can all be distracting. Check if pupils would prefer a small room, away from distractions.

### Staying 'on task'

It can be difficult for a pupil with an ASD to understand what they need to do, when, in order to finish an exam in time. They may also need extra time to process instructions, or to read and understand exam questions. Support teachers can stay with pupils to prompt them for time-keeping and help them stay 'on task'.



### Motor skills difficulties

Many pupils with an ASD have motor skills difficulties, which means their handwriting might be difficult to read. Consider if some pupils can use a computer in exams or possibly an amanuensis (someone who writes down what the pupil dictates).

### Special interests

Special interests are important to many people with an ASD, to the extent that they can become obsessions. In an exam, some pupils could try to bring their special interest into their answers, whether it is relevant or not. For the most part, they should be discouraged from doing this.

However, occasionally it helps to talk about a special interest. One exam question was about television families and what the programme teaches us about their lives. A pupil with an ASD was able to put his extensive knowledge of *The Simpsons* to good use.

## Revision and study leave

Pupils with an ASD may find unstructured time – such as revision time or study leave – difficult. This is because they may not know how to plan their time, or their learning style isn't suited to traditional ways of revising. In this section, we will look at some ways parents and teachers can help.

### Learning styles

Pupils have different learning styles and it helps to consider these when planning revision sessions. Some might learn best by hearing or watching revision material, rather than reading it; others do better when studying at certain times of day, or in a group rather than on their own. Many people also find memory aids, such as flash cards, helpful.

There are all sorts of ways for pupils to revise, some of which may be worth investigating. These

include revision clubs, using the school library, practice with past exam papers, revision guides and computer programs.

You will also find some useful revision resources online. One is BBC Bitesize, which covers school exams from Key Stage 1 onwards (including TGAU in Wales and Scottish Intermediates/Standard Grades and Highers). Visit [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/bitesize](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/bitesize)

### Planning a revision timetable

Revision timetables will be of great help to pupils with an ASD, who may not be able to plan what to revise, when, in order to be ready for their exams.

A revision questionnaire can help you understand how someone learns best and this information can be used to plan a revision timetable. See our example in appendix 2.

Revision timetables can be especially useful during unsupervised time, such as study leave. Healthy eating and plenty of exercise can really help pupils to feel good, relieve anxiety and stress, and to concentrate on their studies. It is a good idea to include time for exercise, meals and snacks in a revision timetable.

## Preparing for exams

Exams mean a change to routine and a step into the unknown, which isn't always easy for pupils with an ASD. There are some simple things that parents and teachers can do to prepare pupils for exams and reduce stress and anxiety.

### Which exams should pupils take?

Teachers can help pupils with an ASD by considering carefully what courses and exams they will take. Withdrawal from a course or an exam can be problematic, so it is important to be sure of your assessment.



# Exams

Some pupils with an ASD need to be stretched and can take a lot of exams, while others won't manage as many. Try to prioritise: pupils with an ASD don't need to sit exams in all subjects if this proves too stressful. They can, however, still attend lessons.

If you don't think that pupils will be ready to take exams in all subjects, encourage them to concentrate on the ones that they are truly interested in. You can also opt for modular courses wherever possible.

Some pupils with an ASD have hyperlexia: they read very well but don't necessarily attach the appropriate meaning to the text. This can give you an exaggerated impression of pupils' abilities. When relevant, take care that the level of the exam is suited to individual pupils.

## Support from teachers

Once you know what courses pupils are taking, you could:

- draw up a weekly study plan which you give to pupils at the start of the course, so they can see what they will be learning and how they will prepare for exams (see our example in appendix 3)
- draw up a timetable showing when exams are taking place – keep it on display in your classroom
- talk about how you'll be preparing for exams at school, for example revision lessons; practice with old exam papers
- for the last two to three weeks of a course, do practice papers or look at past papers to work on pupils' exam technique
- talk about what happens during exams (you could write a short 'social story'; we have included an example in appendix 4)
- try to see pupils at the start of each exam: seeing a familiar face at this time can be comforting.

## Support from parents

Here are some ways in which you can help your child prepare for an exam.

- Teach your child simple relaxation techniques such as taking five deep breaths before entering the exam room.
- Talk to the school about relaxation so that your child can be reminded to use relaxation techniques at the right time.
- Keep items relating to special interests at home as these might distract your child if taken into an exam room.
- If it helps, play relaxing music in the house before your child leaves for an exam.
- Encourage your child to get out and about: physical activity can reduce anxiety.
- Make sure your child has as good a meal as possible before their exam.
- Try to make yourself available during exam times to offer support or talk about concerns.
- Make sure your child has an exam timetable to hand – perhaps put one in the kitchen or their bedroom.
- Try writing a social story about exams. These are short stories, often with pictures, that tell your child why they are taking an exam, or what they can expect to happen on the day. We have included two examples in appendix 4.



## Special arrangements for exams

Schools can make their own arrangements for pupils with an ASD in internal exams. However, for public or external national exams like GCSEs, they must ask for special arrangements (sometimes called access or assessment arrangements) to be put in place, if necessary.

Schools have to show that pupils need special arrangements. For example, pupils may first have been tested by a specialist teacher or an educational psychologist to determine which arrangements may be appropriate for them.

The special arrangements you can ask for include:

- pupils to have extra time to complete exams
- pupils to sit exams in smaller rooms
- pupils to sit exams in small groups or alone
- pupils to get exam papers in different formats, such as digital
- support teachers to act as prompts to keep pupils on task.

These arrangements are offered to all pupils with special educational needs or additional support needs, including ASD, but must be requested in advance from exam boards or awarding bodies (see appendix 1 for a list). There may be deadlines involved. Be aware that the arrangements you can make for these pupils do change.

At the time of writing, applications for special arrangements are made via Access Arrangements Online, an online form on the websites of exam boards. Teachers need a username and password to access the form.

For qualifications offered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), applications are made online using the Assessment Arrangement Request Submission software.

It is wise to put special arrangements in place for internal exams if staffing and resources allow, so that:

- pupils with an ASD are familiar with the arrangements and more likely to benefit from them when taking public or external national exams
- there is a precedent when you ask for similar arrangements in public or external national exams.

## Conclusion

Exams can make pupils with an ASD especially anxious but by understanding the difficulties they face, we can help pupils to prepare, revise, get appropriate support and do as well as they possibly can.



## Appendix 1: exam boards

### Assessment and Qualifications

#### Alliance (AQA) (North)

Devas Street  
Manchester M15 6EX  
Tel: 0161 953 1180  
Email: eos@aqa.org.uk  
Website: www.aqa.org.uk

### Assessment and Qualifications

#### Alliance (AQA) (South)

Stag Hill House  
Guildford  
Surrey GU2 7XJ  
Tel: 01483 506 506  
Email: eos@aqa.org.uk  
Website: www.aqa.org.uk

### Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

29 Clarendon Road  
Clarendon Dock  
Belfast BT1 3BG  
Tel: 02890 261 200  
Email: info@ccea.org.uk  
Website: www.rewardlearning.org.uk

### Edexcel

190 High Holborn  
London WC1V 7BH  
Tel: 0844 576 0027  
Website: www.edexcel.com

### Independent Schools Examinations Board (ISEB)

The Pump House  
16 Queen's Avenue  
Christchurch BH23 1BZ  
Tel: 01202 487 538  
Email: enquiries@iseb.co.uk  
Website: www.iseb.co.uk

### Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)

1 Hills Road  
Cambridge CB1 2EU  
Tel: 01223 553 998  
Email: general.qualifications@ocr.org.uk  
Website: www.ocr.org.uk

### Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

The Optima Building  
58 Robertson Street  
Glasgow G2 8DQ  
or  
Ironmills Road  
Dalkeith  
Midlothian EH22 1LE  
Tel: 0845 279 1000  
Email: customer@sqa.org.uk  
Website: www.sqa.org.uk

### WJEC

245 Western Avenue  
Cardiff CF5 2YX  
Tel: 02920 265 000  
Email: info@wjec.co.uk  
Website: www.wjec.co.uk



## Appendix 2: revision questionnaire

How I learn best	
Name	
My ideal time to study	Morning Afternoon Evening
I like the background to be	Quiet Music on TV on People talking
I like the room to be	Bright Soft light Quite dark
I like to	Eat food Drink Chew on something None of these
I like to study	At home At school
At home	At my table On my bed On the floor Sitting on a soft chair Sitting on a straight chair Sitting on the sofa
At school	At my desk In the library In Learning Support
I study best when I am	Alone With a friend In a small group In a large group With my parents With my teachers
I remember best when	I repeat information to myself I use visual supports like pictures I use memory aids I break information into smaller steps

Adapted with thanks to Thinking Publications, 1995



## Appendix 3: weekly study plan

MATHS		Lesson: Friday at 10am
Week beginning	Topic	
	NEW	REVISION
31 Jan	31.2 distance time graphs 31.3 more real-life graphs Chapter summary and review	Chapter 20 – equivalent fractions
7 Feb	32.1 directions and bearings 32.2 maps and scale drawings Chapter summary and review	Chapter 21 – angles in shapes
14 Feb	33.1 indices 33.2 expanding brackets and simplifying expressions 33.3 factorising simple expressions Chapter summary and review	Chapter 22 – introducing algebra
HALF TERM		
28 Feb	34.1 parallel lines 34.2 angles in quadrilaterals 34.3 properties of polygons	Chapter 23 – measures
7 Mar	34.4 angles in polygons 34.5 Pythagoras' theorem Chapter summary and review	Chapter 24 – equations
14 Mar	35.1 substituting into expressions and formulae 35.2 writing expressions, formulae and equations 35.3 changing the subject of a formula Chapter summary and review	Chapter 25 – two-dimensional shapes





MATHS		Lesson: Friday at 10am
Week beginning	Topic	
21 Mar	36.1 area of parallelograms and triangles 36.2 circle definitions and circumference 36.3 area of a circle 36.4 composite shapes Chapter summary and review	Chapter 26 – using a formula
28 Mar	37.1 linear equations 37.2 inequalities 37.3 trial and improvement Chapter summary and review	Chapter 27 – solid shapes
4 Apr	38.1 plans and elevations 38.2 surface area of prisms 38.3 volume of prisms Chapter summary and review	Chapter 28 – sequences
2 May	39.1 generating sequences using nth term rules 39.2 finding the nth term of a sequence Chapter summary and review	Chapter 29 – straight line graphs
9 May	40.1 linear graphs 40.2 quadratic graphs Chapter summary and review	Chapter 30 – transformations
16 May	41.1 2D and 3D coordinates 41.2 constructions and loci Chapter summary and review	
23 May	Past papers	
HALF TERM		
EXAMS: Monday 6 June Friday 10 June		



## Appendix 4: social stories

Here are two social stories that you could use to explain what exams are and what pupils need to do during an exam.

### All about exams

Sometimes teachers give tests or exams to see what pupils have learnt in lessons.

You can be given a test or an exam in any subject you study at school.

When a teacher tells the class they have a test or an exam they often tell pupils what information will be covered.

It is helpful to listen to what the teacher says and do some revision.

Sometimes pupils feel nervous before or during an exam.

It is OK to feel nervous.

### During an exam

Sometimes teachers give tests or exams for pupils to complete.

During exams, it's important to try and think about the questions and how to answer them.

That way pupils can do their best in exams.

Later, when the exam is finished, pupils may want to think about their special interests. It is OK to think about special interests after the exam.

I will try to think about exam questions and answers during the exam.

## Further reading

Many of the books on this list are available to buy from our website. We receive 5% of the sale price from all the books we sell through [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Attwood, T. (2008).** *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Beaney, J. and Kershaw, P. (2006).** *Inclusion in the secondary school*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Gray, C. (2001).** *My social stories book*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) (2010).** *Access arrangements, reasonable adjustments and special consideration 2010-2011*. Available online: [www.jcq.org.uk/exams\\_office/access\\_arrangements/regulationsandguidance/](http://www.jcq.org.uk/exams_office/access_arrangements/regulationsandguidance/)

**Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council (1998).** *Asperger syndrome – practical strategies for the classroom*. London: The National Autistic Society. Available from NAS Publications: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**The National Autistic Society (2006).** *Autism spectrum disorders: a resource pack for school staff*. Available to download from: [www.autism.org.uk/teacherpack](http://www.autism.org.uk/teacherpack)

**Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (2010).** *Introduction to assessment arrangements for schools and colleges*. Available online: [www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/AA\\_IntroductionAssessmentArrangements.pdf](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/AA_IntroductionAssessmentArrangements.pdf)





### **Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (2010).**

*Assessment arrangements explained.* Available  
online: [www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files\\_ccc/AA\\_AssessmentArrangementsExplained.pdf](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/AA_AssessmentArrangementsExplained.pdf)

Many of the books on this list are available to buy  
through our website [www.autism.org.uk/shop](http://www.autism.org.uk/shop)

If an item is marked as available from NAS  
Publications, please contact:

NAS Publications  
Central Books Ltd  
99 Wallis Road  
London E9 5LN  
Tel: +44 (0)845 458 9911  
Fax: +44 (0)845 458 9912  
Email: [nas@centralbooks.com](mailto:nas@centralbooks.com)  
Online orders: [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

## **Useful contacts**

### **NAS Education Rights Service**

Information, support and advice on educational  
rights and entitlements

Tel: 0808 800 4102

Website: [www.autism.org.uk/educationrights](http://www.autism.org.uk/educationrights)

### **Autism Helpline**

General information, advice and support for people  
with an ASD, families and professionals

Tel: 0808 800 4104

(open Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm)



Exams are a time of high anxiety for all pupils, but especially those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This guide, for parents, carers and teachers of secondary school-aged pupils, has advice on planning revision and study leave, and some practical ways to prepare for exams.

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism.

Over half a million people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over two million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day.

Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. Which means that many of these two million people get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need.

*Together, we are going to change this.*

The National Autistic Society  
393 City Road  
London EC1V 1NG

Switchboard: 020 7833 2299  
Autism Helpline: 0808 800 4104  
Minicom: 0845 070 4003  
Fax: 020 7833 9666  
Email: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk)  
Website: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)