

# Module 2

## Understanding cognitive and social development in Youth with ASD



# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. **Understand** Cognitive and social development in youth with ASD
2. **Learn** how to support the cognitive and social development in youth with ASD
3. **Identify** the cognitive and social challenges for young people with ASD
4. **Distinguish** the behavior that is triggered by the underlying cognitive and social challenges.
5. **Adopt** the theoretical knowledge into appropriate responses when facing young people with



# How do you define cognitive and social development?



Image from [Pexels](#)

# Cognitive development in Youth with ASD

**Everyone is different,** Cognitive skills of young people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) vary from one person to another.

These skills can improve over time.

- ▶ The cognitive strengths and weaknesses are typically exhibited by people with ASD and includes difficulties predicting others' behavior based on their thoughts and feelings (so-called theory of mind) and problems regulating and controlling their behavior (termed executive function), combined with an aptitude for detecting parts of objects or small details.

Science Daily, source: society for research in child development, sept 2010: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/09/100915080429.htm>

# ASD and Theory of mind

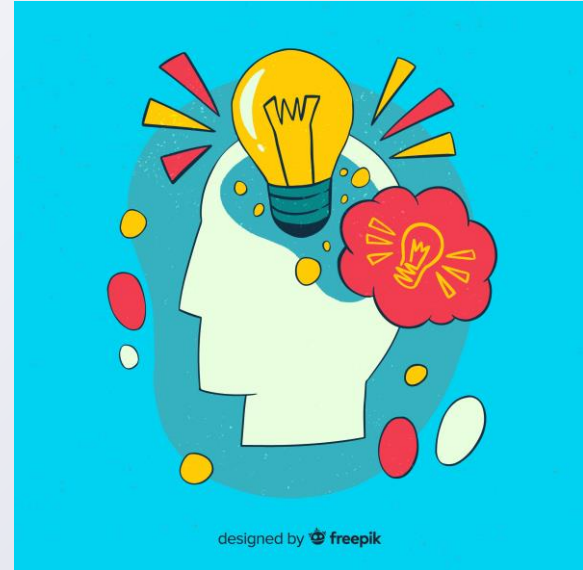
- ▶ Theory of mind is the ability to understand that other people do not share the same thoughts and feelings as we do. It is also being able to recognize that others have their own thoughts and feelings, and understanding how why they behave in a certain way.
- ▶ Because of difficulties with Theory of Mind, Young people with ASD **may** believe that others know what they are thinking or feeling, and have trouble seeing things from others' perspective.
- ▶ Challenges with Theory of Mind are a main reasons why young people with ASD struggle to navigate social interaction.



Source: Autism & Cognitive Development, August 2019 by BabySparks; <https://babysparks.com/2019/08/30/autism-cognitive-development/> - Image from [Pexels](#)

# ASD and executive Functions

- ▶ Executive functions are a set of cognitive skills that help us regulate, control, and manage our thoughts and behavior. It's common for young people with ASD to have difficulty with the following in various degree:
  - ▶ **Planning** – A person **may** struggle to plan the steps involved in various tasks, from putting on shoes to go shopping.
  - ▶ **Working Memory** – This involves being able to hold information in the mind long enough to use it.



Source: Autism & Cognitive Development, August 2019 by BabySparks;  
<https://babysparks.com/2019/08/30/autism-cognitive-development/>

Immagine di [Freepik](#)

# ASD and executive Functions

- ▶ **Attention** – People with ASD **may** have an uncanny ability to focus on something, but often struggle to shift attention from one thing to another and back again. It can also be difficult to filter information in order to decide what to pay attention to.
- ▶ **Initiating** – People with ASD **may** struggle to begin tasks or come up with ideas on their own.
- ▶ **Control emotions and behavior** – People with ASD **may** lack impulse control, which can show up as big feelings, acting out, or behaviors like rocking, spinning, or flapping hands.
- ▶ **Flexibility** – Struggling with transitions, and unexpected changes in routines or plans, is common for people with ASD.

Source: Autism & Cognitive Development, August 2019 by BabySparks;  
<https://babysparks.com/2019/08/30/autism-cognitive-development/> Image from [Pexels](#)



# Social development in Youth with ASD

- ▶ Young people with ASD often experience difficulty with social and emotional skills in varies degrees.
- ▶ Research suggests that this may be because certain areas of the brain that are tied to social-emotional functioning are less developed in individuals with ASD.
- ▶ While all individuals with ASD face challenges in some degree navigating the world of emotions and social interaction, quality intervention can help children and young people with ASD improve their social-emotional skills.

Source: Autism & Social-Emotional Development, August 2019 by BabySparks; <https://babysparks.com/2019/08/26/autism-social-emotional-development/>



# Understanding and expressing emotion



- ▶ Young people with ASD often struggle to read, interpret, and respond appropriately to others' emotions.
- ▶ It **may** also be hard for them to imitate emotions and feel empathy.
- ▶ It's important for others to understand that an individual with ASD isn't intentionally being rude or uncaring – they simply don't have the skills to understand, for example, how to return a smile or show concern if someone is upset.

Source: Autism & Social-Emotional Development, August 2019 by BabySparks;  
<https://babysparks.com/2019/08/26/autism-social-emotional-development/> -

Image from [Pexels](#)

# Paying attention to facial expressions

- ▶ Young people with ASD **may** scan a person's face in a different way than their typically-developing peers.
- ▶ Normally when having a conversation, we would focus on a person's eyes first, and then moves on to the rest of the face.
- ▶ An individual with ASD, on the other hand, **may** focus only on the other person's mouth, which offers less emotional information than they eyes.

Source: Autism & Social-Emotional Development, August 2019 by BabySparks;  
<https://babysparks.com/2019/08/26/autism-social-emotional-development/>  
- Image from [Pexels](#)



# Participating in joint activities

- ▶ When participating in joint activities, the group will be focusing on the same thing. This joint attention **may** be difficult for young people with ASD.
- ▶ It **may** also be a challenge for young people with ASD to understand other people's perspective and intentions in a joint activity, as well as participating in turn-taking activities including conversation.
- ▶ Further challenges **may** be using social referencing. Often the compensation (if possible) will be looking to peers and other people they know well, to see how to respond when confronted with unfamiliar or unexpected events



### The challenges of cognitive and social development for youth with ASD

The cognitive and social development complement each other, which means if you are facing difficulties in your cognitive development, you will also face difficulties socially and vice versa.



Tab 1



Tab 2



Tab 3

### In which situations do the challenges become apparent

Often you will see the difficulties in various social settings, from meeting new people and initiating small-talk, to being part of a larger group of people where you have to take part in an activity that requires cooperation with others.

Of course the degree of difficulties will vary from person to person and from setting to setting



Tab 1



Tab 2



Tab 3

### What to remember:

In order to support and include youth with ASD, it is important to be aware of the challenges they face on a daily basis and remember that even though they have difficulties they must still be treated with equality and respect.



Tab 1



Tab 2



Tab 3

# Emotional development: teenagers with autism spectrum disorder



# Emotional challenges

- ▶ The young person might need help to recognise emotions e.g. verbally mirroring “I can see you are confused” or “did that make you happy”
- ▶ They might know the words and name for different emotions and feelings, but still have trouble recognising those emotions and feelings in themselves and others, particularly when they’re upset.
- ▶ They might also have difficulty recognising other people’s facial expressions, tone of voice or body language.

Source: Raisingchildre.net.au, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/development/social-emotional-development/recognising-understanding-emotions-autistic-children-teens>



# Understanding and accepting emotions

- ▶ If the young person understands why he feels the way he does, it can help him accepting his emotions.
- ▶ As part of understanding emotions, it's important for the surroundings to validate the feelings and help describing them with words as well as helping to understand why he is feeling the way he is.



Source: Raisingchildre.net.au, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/development/social-emotional-development/recognising-understanding-emotions-autistic-children-teens>

image from [Pexels](#)

# Understanding and accepting emotions

- ▶ Strong emotions can be overwhelming for people with ASD, especially if they are children or young people.
- ▶ They often need help to manage strong emotions and calm down from them. Different strategies and techniques can be taught to manage these emotions. Strategies can be taking deep breaths, removing yourself to a “safe” space such as a quiet room.
- ▶ Remember; learning to manage strong emotions takes practice, and are best learnt when being calm. This will make it easier to remember and use when feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

Source: Raisingchildre.net.au, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/development/social-emotional-development/recognising-understanding-emotions-autistic-children-teens>

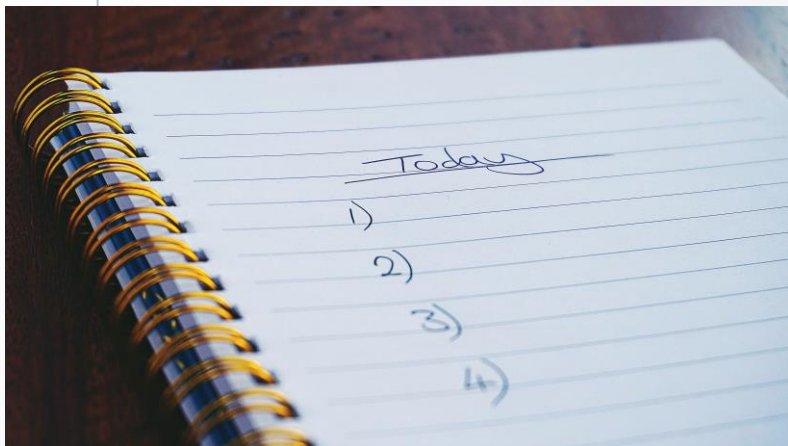
# Steps to successful emotion-management

- ▶ Self-awareness— Becoming more aware of personal thoughts, behaviors, and physical states which are associated with the ASD is important for the young person in order for him to notice the early signs of losing control of his emotions.
- ▶ It might be helpful to write down a list of changes he notices, as he begins to feel the need to over-react to something.



Source: MyAsbergersChild.com <https://www.myaspergerschild.com/2017/02/aspergershigh-functioning-autistic.html> - Image from [Pexels](#)

# Strategies to support emotional development



- ▶ Assist the young person in developing an emotion-management record— keeping a diary or chart of situations that trigger strong reactions might also be helpful. List the situation, the level of frustration on a scale of 1 to 10, and the coping strategies that helped him overcoming or reducing feelings of frustration.

Source: MyAsbergersChild.com <https://www.myaspergerschild.com/2017/02/aspergershigh-functioning-autistic.html> - Image from [Pexels](#)

# Strategies to successful emotion-management

- ▶ Becoming motivated— If the young person can identify why he would like to manage his emotions more successfully, it will help him staying motivated. Identify what benefits he can expect in everyday living from improving his coping skills.
- ▶ Awareness of situations— Practice becoming more aware of the situations that are associated with outbursts. The young person may want to ask other people who know him to describe situations and behaviors they have noticed.

Source: MyAsbergersChild.com <https://www.myasbergerschild.com/2017/02/aspergershigh-functioning-autistic.html>

# How do I support cognitive and social development?

- ▶ Since most of the cognitive challenges a person with autism faces occur at the executive level such as planning, decision making, emotional self-control and short-term memory, he can benefit from cognitive activities e.g. puzzles, games with other peers where you take turns.



Source: Braintherapytms, may 2022; Cognitive Activities for Autism.

<https://braintherapytms.com/cognitive-activities-for-autism/> - Image from [Pexels](#)

# Strategies to support cognitive and social development?

- ▶ The aim of the cognitive activities should be practicing the cognitive skills, preferably in a form of social setting.
- ▶ When struggling to fit in during social interactions, you need to practice to make improvements.
- ▶ Social activities to improve social interactions can include: Card games, board games, art classes, team-sports etc.

Source: Braintherapytms, may 2022; Cognitive Activities for Autism. <https://braintherapytms.com/cognitive-activities-for-autism/>

# Strategies to support cognitive and social development?

- ▶ And lastly a way of supporting cognitive and social development is focusing on life skills.
- ▶ In order to live your life as independently as possible, you need life skills.
- ▶ This can include safety, self-care, and daily activities that a person living alone must accomplish for themselves e.g. personal hygiene, shopping, public transportation etc.
- ▶ A person with ASD can make great strides in their understanding of the world around them. This is especially true when they are supported in cognitive and social development from their surroundings.





## Questions

Be as predictable as possible, if needed to be flexible in conversation, give the young person time to adapt to the new subject

How can I support the young person with ASD in his cognitive and social development, in a respectful and equitable manner

Be precise in your communication. Tell the young person what you felt and your thoughts. Do not expect him to be able to understand underlying hints, sarcasm or irony



Be curious; how do the young person experience his challenges? Which situations are especially difficult? Does he have any helpful strategies in such situations?

If you are planning a new daily activity, make sure to take it step by step, no multitasking and not to many distractions from the surroundings. E.g. make a written plan, use pictures or other visual aids, in order to help the learning process

# And remember:

- ▶ Always focus on the strengths and not the challenges and difficulties – if we want to learn new skills in life, we need to build on the our strengths and not our difficulties
- ▶ Always treat each other in a respectful and equal manner - accommodate to each other's shortcomings
- ▶ Focus on the person and not on the diagnosis

Image from [Freepik](#)



# Assessment



## Type the correct answers in the boxes

Do all young people have the same degree of cognitive and social challenges?

What does “theory of mind” mean?

What are executive functions?

Which situations are for young people with ASD often the most challenging?

### Type the correct answers in the boxes

Do all young people have the same degree of cognitive and social challenges?

*No, it is different from individual to individual*

What does “theory of mind” mean?

*The ability to understand that other people do not share the same thoughts and feelings as we do, and therefor having trouble seeing things from others' perspective*

What are executive functions?

*A set of cognitive skills that help us regulate, control and manage our thoughts and behavior*

Which situations are for young people with ASD often the most challenging?

*Social situations*

QUESTION 1: *Does all young people with ASD have difficulties in social situations?*

Possible  
answer(s)

- A. True
- B. False

QUESTION 1: *Does all young people with ASD have difficulties in social situations?*

<b>Possible answer(s)</b>	A. True B. False
<b>Correct answer(s)</b>	A. False
<b>Response to correct answer(s)</b>	Congratulations! Your answer is correct.
<b>Response to wrong answer(s)</b>	Ups try again. The correct answer is “B. False”. Not all young people with ASD have difficulties in social situation, but it is a common difficulty for many young people with ASD

**QUESTION 2:** If you have ASD the cognitive and social challenges will stay the same throughout your life

**Possible answer(s)**

- A. True
- B. False



## True / False Questions

**QUESTION 2:** If you have ASD the cognitive and social challenges will stay the same throughout your life

<b>Possible answer(s)</b>	A. True B. False
<b>Correct answer(s)</b>	B. False
<b>Response to correct answer(s)</b>	Congratulations! Your answer is correct.
<b>Response to wrong answer(s)</b>	Ups try again. The correct answer is “B. False”. Like all other people, you can train your cognitive and social skills and thereby reducing your challenges

QUESTION 3: When you are with a young person with ASD it is important to remember

### Possible answer(s)

1. Always focus on the strengths and not the challenges and difficulties
2. Always treat each other in a respectful and equal manner
3. Focus on the person and not on the diagnosis
4. All of the above

QUESTION 3: When you are with a young person with ASD it is important to remember

<b>Possible answer(s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Always focus on the strengths and not the challenges and difficulties</li><li>2. Always treat each other in a respectful and equal manner</li><li>3. Focus on the person and not on the diagnosis</li><li>4. All of the above</li></ol>
<b>Correct answer(s)</b>	Congratulations! Your answer is correct.
<b>Response to correct answer(s)</b>	4. All of the above
<b>Response to wrong answer(s)</b>	Not quite right. The correct answer is “4”.

# Bibliography



## References

- Autism & Cognitive Development, August 2019 by BabySparks; <https://babysparks.com/2019/08/30/autism-cognitive-development/>
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- Youtube: Emotional development: Teenagers with Autism Spectrum Disorder [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=\\_loGbbOwsFs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_loGbbOwsFs)

# End of Module

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