



Where Autism
Professionals Connect

Exclusively sponsored by:



Autism: The basics for police and security officers

There's a commotion on the high street, as a store security guard grapples with a man holding tightly to a plastic carrier bag. Police are called and restrain the man, now shouting loudly, as a crowd gathers nearby. What is the problem?

As it turns out, the only problem was that the man, an adult with autism, refused to hand his shopping bag over to a store security guard who thought he "looked shifty." The situation escalated due to communication problems, anxiety and fear, all made worse by a lack of knowledge and understanding about autism.

This article provides basic information for security and law enforcement staff that can help you avoid mistakes and provide equal service to people with autism.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. People with autism experience difficulties in three major areas:

- Communication
- Social understanding
- Flexibility of thought and behaviour

Most also have sensory-perceptual differences from typical people.

Communication difficulties can range from being completely non-verbal (unable to speak) to finding it difficult to speak easily with others or interpret what others say. A person might, for example, have a large vocabulary and say a great deal but only on certain topics, and without stopping. They might appear to understand what you're saying, but actually have very little comprehension.

Social understanding means knowing what to do when interacting with other people, knowing what to expect, being able to guess what the outcome of your actions might be. Difficulties in social understanding in autism can range from being completely unable to interact with people

to interacting in ways that others might find odd or unwelcome. For example, a person might think that if a woman smiles at him on the bus, it means she wants to be his girlfriend.

Difficulties with flexibility of thought and behaviour mean that the person may struggle to adjust to changing situations, interruptions, or problems. For example, a person with autism often has very exact routines, and could find it very hard to cope if these are interrupted.

Sensory-perceptual differences can affect any sense, causing over- or under-reaction to sight, sound, touch or smell.

Many, but not all, people with autism also have learning difficulties or seizure disorders.

For police officers, the most difficult situations are usually those that involve autistic people whose differences are not obvious. Asperger syndrome is a form of autism with normal intelligence.

Meeting people with autism.

Why might someone with autism come into contact with police or other security professionals? For all of the reasons that any other member of public might, and for a few special ones.

First, a person with autism could witness a crime, or be a criminal suspect. According to most experts, autistic people are not very likely to commit major crimes such as assault, robbery or murder. They do, however, sometimes get into trouble because of obsessive interests or a lack of understanding about how their behaviour might affect others. For example, a fascination with computers could lead to computer hacking, and a fascination with women with long hair could lead to accusations of unwanted touching. Behaviours such as stalking, firesetting, or sending unwanted or even threatening communications might occur. A few do become involved in serious crime.

Second, people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to crime, including people with autism. They are sometimes specifically targeted by criminals, either because the criminal thinks they will be easy to take advantage of or steal from, or in forms of disability hate crime. This can include being fooled into participating in crime. For example, a person with autism could be coerced into hiding something in their home by a criminal gang. Many have been bullied or harassed.

Third, a person with autism may behave in an unusual way in a public place. Store security or a security guard may be approached by concerned people, or police may be called.

Finally, people with autism may come into the picture as family members of another individual who is a victim, witness, suspect or perpetrator.

Laws and regulations.

Autism is a disability that is covered under the [Equality Act 2010](#).

Autism is also covered under laws and regulations related to support of vulnerable persons. For example, the use of an Appropriate Adult during processes like identification, searches and questioning is a must. This can be a parent, carer or social worker: see the [National Appropriate Adult Network](#) web site for more information about how to benefit from this practice, which helps to protect both vulnerable people and law enforcement staff.

The [Autism Act 2009](#) aimed to ensure that people with autism have equal access to services and supports, including within the criminal justice system. Each region now has an autism strategy, and in many areas this includes CJS representatives.

Communication is the key.

Remember that difficulties with communication are at the centre of autism, and take steps to ensure that you communicate clearly and unambiguously. Give the person plenty of time to answer questions, and avoid using speech that could confuse, such as metaphors, sayings, or leading questions.

Some people with autism use augmentative or alternative communication (AAC) methods or devices. These can include small cards with words and pictures on them, phone apps, or communication devices. Some people who are able to speak use these when they are stressed or traumatised, but not at all times.

Changing environments and procedures.

Sensory-perceptual difficulties can make things like fluorescent lights, flashing lights, sirens, and busy environments almost impossible to cope with. Experiencing sensations differently than others, disrupted routines, and not knowing what to expect can lead to distraction, anxiety and fear.

Some police departments—for example, the Birmingham Central unit of the West Midlands Police—have created less distracting and frightening environments for interviewing vulnerable people. This is an excellent practice.

It's important to know that a person with autism can be a reliable witness: you just need to ask the right questions and be patient. They may notice different things than a typical witness, for example details of clothing or cars rather than what was happening between people.

Always consider how you are interpreting a statement or evidence provided by a person with autism carefully. Be open to other interpretations – ask the person exactly what they mean, and encourage the use visual aids such as drawings and diagrams.

Alternatives to prison sentences also need consideration, as do adaptations to jail and prison environments when they are necessary.

Autism and crime prevention.

Author: Dr Mitzi Waltz
Date of publication: 27 October 2014

Police and other security personnel should be vigilant about crime prevention where people with autism are concerned. Their vulnerability can mean that extra advice or assistance is needed around issues like personal security and home safety.

There are also serious problems around bullying of disabled people in many UK communities, and abuse or neglect may occur in family homes, service premises, or care homes. Good relationships between people with autism and law enforcement will encourage reporting and help to keep people safe.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Attwood, T., Hénault, I and Dubin, T. (2014) *The Autism Spectrum, Sexuality and the Law*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Autism Risk & Safety Management: <http://www.autismriskmanagement.com>
Former US law enforcement officer Dennis Debbault runs this site, which includes much useful information and further links.

Baines, S. and Christie, A. (2013) "What do the Autism Self-Assessment Frameworks (2011 and 2013) tell us about the Criminal Justice System?" London: Public Health England.

Beardon, L. (2008) *Asperger Syndrome and Perceived Offending Behaviour* [doctoral thesis]. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

Davis, B. and Schunick, W.G. (2002) *Dangerous Encounters—Avoiding Perilous Situations with Autism*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Debbaudt, D. (2004) "Beyond Guilt or Innocence," *Leadership Perspectives in Developmental Disability*, 4 (1). A version is available online: <http://www.ahany.org/Debbaudt.htm>

Debbaudt, D. (2001) *Autism, Advocates and Law Enforcement Professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Easy Read information about keeping safe: <http://www.bild.org.uk/easy-read/easy-read-information/keeping-safe-easy-read-information/>

This set of pamphlets and other documents from around the UK has been collected by the British Institute for Learning Difficulties (BILD). They are all written in simple language, most with helpful pictures, and cover topics ranging from fire safety to sexual abuse and mate crime—excellent for working directly with people who have autism and a learning difficulty.

Home Office (2012) "Equality Act 2010" and guidance:
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act>

Mayes, Thomas A. and Koegel, Robert L. (2003) "Persons with autism and criminal justice: Core concepts and leading cases," *Journal of Positive Behaviour Support*, 5 (2): pp. 92-100.

Copyright: When reproducing this document, you must fully acknowledge the author of the document as shown at the top of the page. Please see Network Autism Terms and Conditions for details.

Author: Dr Mitzi Waltz
Date of publication: 27 October 2014

Mencap (2012) "Stand By Me" campaign: <https://www.mencap.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/successes/police-forces-commit-end-disability-hate-crime>
Mencap's campaign on disability hate crime has worked closely with many UK police forces. You can find information and its "How to Stand By Me" guide to best practice in tackling disability hate crime on this site.

Myers, F. (2004) "On the borderline?: People with learning disabilities and/or autistic spectrum disorders in secure, forensic and other specialist settings." Edinburgh: Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health. Online at: <http://scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/06/19505/38853>

National Autistic Society (2012) "Criminal justice system and ASDs." Online at: <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/criminal-justice/criminal-justice-system-and-asds.aspx> [Accessed 21 May 2012]

National Autistic Society. (2008) *Autism: A guide for criminal justice professionals*: <http://www.autism.org.uk/Working-with/Criminal-justice/Autism-a-guide-for-criminal-justice-professionals.aspx>

Birmingham City Council Health & Social Care Overview & Scrutiny (2012) *Adults with Autism and the Criminal Justice System*: <http://network.autism.org.uk/file/adults-autism-and-criminal-justice-system>

Prison Reform Trust (2011) "Response to 'Autism: Recognition, referral, diagnosis and management of adults on the autism spectrum; NICE guideline; draft for consultation, December 2011.'" Online at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/Consultationresponses>

Woodbury-Smith, M.R., Clare, I.C.H., Holland, A.J., and Kearns, A. (2006) "High functioning autistic spectrum disorders, offending and other law-breaking: Findings from a community sample," *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 17 (1): pp. 108 – 120.

USEFUL WEBSITES

In addition to the NAS, you may find the following organisations helpful.

The Ann Craft Trust

<http://www.anncrafttrust.org/>

Helpline: 0115 951 5400

Organisation that works to protect disabled children and people with learning disabilities from abuse.

National Appropriate Adult Network

<http://www.appropriateadult.org.uk/>

Organisation that trains and provides Appropriate Adults to support vulnerable people who are in custody or being questioned.

Author: Dr Mitzi Waltz
Date of publication: 27 October 2014

Respond

<http://www.respond.org.uk>

Helpline: 0808 808 0700

Organisation that supports people with learning difficulties, their families, carers and professionals affected by trauma and abuse.

Victim Support

<http://www.victimsupport.org.uk>

Organisation that supports crime victims.