

## ***AUTISM AT RIVERSIDE***

**'Learning to Live Life to the Full'**

***This provision document was reviewed and agreed at a meeting of the Governors' Student Development Committee on:***

***7 March, 2017***

(Policy to be reviewed triennially).

***Next review date – Spring term, 2020***

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## WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects social communication and interaction. People on the autism spectrum may find it difficult to understand how the world around them operates and to interact with others. In particular they may have trouble learning, understanding and interpreting the unwritten rules of social interaction and relationships that most people take for granted.

## RIVERSIDE'S PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

Riverside makes special arrangements for its students with autism to recognise the uniqueness of their difficulties, whilst at the same time ensuring that these students have an inclusive experience at school and feel integrated into school life with an equal opportunity to succeed as their peers with different difficulties. There is a lead teacher for autism who offers advice and internal training as appropriate.

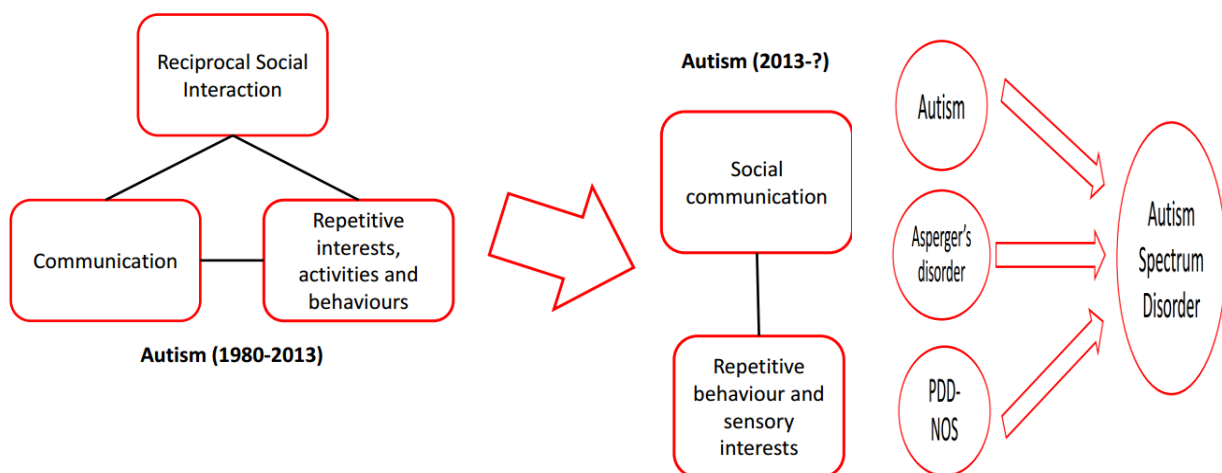
Full details of Riverside's work with its all its students, including those with autism, are contained in other school policies; in particular:

- Communication Policy
- Behaviour Management Policy
- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Curriculum Policy
- Sensory Policy

However, our delivery of the curriculum and wider programme of learning for our students with autism is informed by our knowledge of the condition as outlined in the sections below, and our overarching specialist approaches to working with our students with autism are also summarised in this policy.

## THE DYAD OF IMPAIRMENTS

In 2013 a new version of the diagnostic manual for ASD (DSM-5) was introduced. This replaced the traditional triad of impairment view of autism with that of a dyad.



### The main changes are:

- Social and communication deficits are now placed together because they have been deemed inseparable.
- Sensory aspects have been added to fixated interests and repetitive behaviours to recognise the significance of sensory sensitivities for people on the autistic spectrum.

- Separate diagnoses of Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS have been replaced by a single diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder.
- For the first time the specific diagnostic needs of girls and women are recognised.

### ***Social communication***

People with autism can experience difficulties in communicating with others and in understanding what others are communicating to them. They cannot always interpret the actions and intentions of others, making social interaction very difficult. For example, a person with autism may:

- use overly formal and stilted language
- be unable to initiate or sustain two-way communication appearing aloof and uninterested
- be unable to understand social rules, (e.g. standing too close to others, inappropriate touching, inappropriate greetings or choice of conversation or make abrupt or insensitive comments
- find it difficult to understand sarcasm, irony or metaphors
- interpret instructions literally (e.g. "go and wash your hands in the toilet")
- have difficulty reading other people's facial expressions and avoid or overuse eye contact
- have little or no verbal language and may use signing or gesture appropriately or inappropriately
- find it difficult to understand turn-taking and group work
- not understand the concept of relationships and friendship in the same way as other people.

### ***Social imagination and repetitive interests, activities and behaviours***

People with autism may have highly developed imaginations, but have difficulty with flexibility of thought. They tend to be rigid thinkers and struggle with hypothetical situations or to empathise with another's of view. They may experience difficulties with:

- Adapting to changes of routine
- Dealing with changes of topic or following multiple concurrent subjects.
- Being able to multi-task, or to shift attention readily between subjects and tasks.
- develop rule-bound behaviour and inflexible routines, which can inhibit social development

Where a **special interest** is compatible with the student's subject choice, it can be a positive aid to learning but special interests can also be a barrier to learning when compulsory subjects of study fall outside that narrow frame of interest.

### ***Sensory sensitivities***

In many students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the processing of sensory experience may be disordered or delayed. The slightest change or difficulty with processing such information can influence how we manage daily living skills, academic progress and social interactions. Many people on the autism spectrum have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Any of the senses may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times. These sensory differences can affect behaviour; can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain and have a profound effect on a person's life.

| Sense                         | Hypo-sensitive – Low sensitivity (seekers)   | Hyper-sensitive – High sensitivity (avoiders)  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Sight                         | Objects appear quite dark, or lose some of their features; central vision may be blurred but peripheral vision quite sharp or vice versa. Poor depth perception resulting in clumsiness.                       | Distorted vision - objects and bright lights can appear to jump around. Easier and more pleasurable to focus on a detail rather than the whole object.   |
| Sound                         | May not acknowledge particular sounds. Might enjoy crowded, noisy places or bang doors and objects.  | Noise can be magnified and sounds become distorted and muddled. Inability to cut out background noise, leading to difficulties concentrating.  |
| Smell                         | Some people have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odours (this can include their own body odour).  | Smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause toileting problems. Avoids people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.   |
| Taste                         | Likes very spicy foods. Eats or mouths non-edible items such as stones, dirt, soil, grass, metal, faeces (known as pica).  | Finds some flavours and foods too strong and overpowering. May lead to a restricted diet. Certain textures cause discomfort - may only eat smooth foods.   |
| Touch                         | Has a high pain threshold. May be unable to feel food in the mouth. May self-harm. Enjoys heavy objects (e.g. weighted blankets) on top of them. Chews on everything, including clothing and inedible objects. | Touch can be painful and uncomfortable - people may not like to be touched and this can affect their relationships with others. Dislikes having anything on hands or feet. Difficulties brushing and washing hair because head is sensitive. May find many food textures uncomfortable. Only tolerates certain types of clothing or textures |
| Balance vestibular            | A need to rock, swing or spin to get some sensory input.   | Difficulties with activities like sport, where we need to control our movements. Difficulties stopping quickly or during an activity.  |
| Body awareness proprioception | Stands too close to others, because they cannot measure their proximity to other people and judge personal space. Finds it hard to navigate rooms and avoid obstructions. May bump into people.                | Difficulties with fine motor skills, e.g. manipulating small objects like buttons or shoe laces. Moves whole body to look at something.  |

## OTHER FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH AUTISM

### ***Central coherence***

People with autism can often notice and recall small details that others may miss, but may have difficulty putting these small details together to view the bigger picture. Central coherence is the ability to bring lots of small details together to form the 'whole picture'. It could also be described as the ability to 'read between the lines' of a situation. People with autism often struggle with this and teachers are mindful that situations that students with autism may need support to understand the wider aspects of a situation.

### ***Executive function***

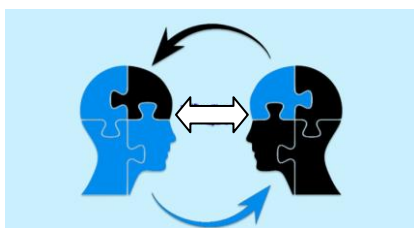
People with autism often have the ability to fully focus on a matter of special interest to them, whilst having difficulty in processing a series of thoughts and actions. Executive function is the ability to organise and plan actions, routines, thoughts and behaviour in a logical and rational way. People with autism may experience significant difficulties with executive functioning and therefore find it difficult to decide which actions to carry out, and in what order, to complete tasks. At Riverside we aim to support our students with this through considering carefully how we give instructions and through the use of visual structure and schedules.

### ***Theory of mind***

People with autism are often said to lack 'theory of mind'. This is the ability to recognise other people's thoughts, feelings and agendas and understand that these differ from their own. They may be less able to empathise with others and can struggle to understand other people's emotions. It may also be difficult for people with autism to recognise and judge other people's intentions. This can make them vulnerable to bullying and exploitation. At Riverside we are fully mindful of this risk, and topics such as understanding feelings and emotions and analysing the intentions of others (e.g. stranger danger) are an integral part of the school's PSHE curriculum.

### **Double empathy**

However more recent studies in this area have begun to focus on Double Empathy. Whilst this continues to recognise the difficulties people with autism may have in empathising with non-autistic people, it also places onus on the non-autistic person to consider the thoughts and actions of the person with autism and try to empathise with them.



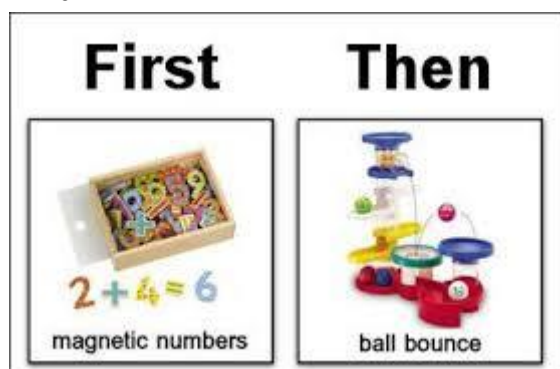
This ability to not make blanket assumptions about a situation but to 'tune in' to each autistic person as an individual can be termed the ability to develop an '**autism lens**'. The table 'Autism lens: understanding the actions of pupils on the autism spectrum' (AET) (See Appendix 1) outlines a number of scenarios and suggests how these may be viewed from the aspect of a person with autism

## BEHAVIOURS ASSOCIATED WITH AUTISM

### ***Self-stimulatory behaviour***

Many people with autism show self-stimulatory behaviour such as hand flapping, twiddling, tearing or rocking. This can absorb them completely and impact on their readiness for learning. Self-stimulatory behaviour can be a response to environmental stress and be quite pleasurable. Strategies that may help include

- Rocking, (which can be part of movement, exercise or music activities)
- Vestibular activities
- Intensive Interaction programmes
- Deep Pressure massage
- Using a first/then or now/next system whereby a student is encouraged to engage in a classroom activity by confirming with that students that once the activity is completed they will have time to carry out their preferred activity.



### ***Challenging behaviours***






Students with autism may display challenging behaviours which are often related to their difficulties with:

- Communication (including social communication)
- Rigidity to set routines and fear of change
- Unusual sensory experiences
- An inability to predict consequences of actions

Identifying triggers and pre-empting these behaviours will help to reduce their frequency. Strategies can then include distraction or de-escalation such as walking, singing, time-out, or whatever has a calming effect on the individual student. Strategies that can be implemented to reduce anxiety and aggressive behaviour are:

- Clear, consistent daily routines communicated at an appropriate level
- Predictable routines and visual cues (schedules, timetables etc.)
- Identifying antecedents and consequences to behaviours and viewing behaviours with an autism lens i.e. how may the autistic person perceive this situation in order to result in such behaviour.
- Consultation with others to avoid events and situations that may cause stress
- De-escalate situations wherever possible (in school this will be following the Team Teach approach)
- Emphasis on reinforcing social skills, social communication through direct and indirect teaching

- Use of strategies such as social stories, movement breaks, rewards, schedules, work stations, timetables, and clear, repetitive language can all help reduce anxiety.
- Encouraging students to use the 'Incredible 5-point scale' system to indicate their level of anxiety/arousal.

|   | Feels like  | Looks like  | I can   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 |  | Screaming<br>Hitting<br>Kicking<br>Running away           | Go to break area<br>Take deep breaths<br>Go back to a 4 |
| 4 |  | Yelling<br>Not being in my space<br>Arguing               | Drink water<br>Take a break<br>Go back to a 3           |
| 3 |  | Loud voice<br>Not following directions                    | Take deep breaths<br>Ask for help<br>Go back to a 2     |
| 2 |  | Listening to others<br>Calm words & body<br>Doing my best | Earn stars & have a great day!                          |
| 1 |  | Tired eyes<br>Lying on floor<br>Not listening             | Get a drink<br>Stand & Stretch<br>Get fresh air         |

After an episode of challenging behaviour, some strategies to wind down will include:

- Creating a safe, calm space for the student to recover. Many of the classrooms have a small chill-out room for this purpose.
- Seeking support from colleagues
- Discussing strategies with staff and parents and use joint problem-solving strategies
- Staying positive and acknowledge your own achievements and the student's.
- Reviewing the Behaviour Programme and/or their communication or sensory profiles.
- Recording behaviour using the school's SOLAR assessment and reporting system.

### ***Eating problems***

Often students with autism have a severely limited range of food they will consider eating and may insist on particular arrangements of food, such as:

- Separate plates for foods
- Gravy not touching other foods
- Particular brands of food
- Particular textures / tastes

Riverside ensures that there is a collaboration of all parties and a gradual approach to help to reduce students' anxieties with food. The process should not be rushed and emphasis should be on a relaxed approach and ensuring there is a consistent eating routine with clear boundaries. All factors are taken into consideration when exploring difficulties that the student is having with food. (This is an important area of Riverside's work). Aspects to consider include:

- Setting – are there too many distractions / noise?
- Is queuing / waiting a problem?
- Is it the quantity of food?
- Is it the person who is serving the food?
- Does the student understand what they can and can't eat? (especially for religious observance / vegetarians)
- Is there a lack of tolerance, sensitivity, fear of new things?
- Is there clear communication so that the student understands the routine?



When the central issue is clearly identified then a process of planning strategies to overcome these problems can be agreed. In certain circumstances liaison with the School Nurse is appropriate e.g. weight gain/loss or severely restricted diet. This can then lead to a School medical and/or Dietician referral.

## **BARRIERS TO LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM**

Students with autism are often mainly visual learners. Clear routines and visual cues and timetables facilitate learning, and newly acquired skills need to be practiced in a variety of settings in order to generalise their learning.

Developing communication skills is not just about developing speech but also building on the non-verbal cues and communication that we all use. Appropriate strategies need to offer students with autism ways to experience different types of communication and understand and interpret different ways people can and do communicate. Riverside staff and other school stakeholders are always mindful of these issues.

## **COMMUNICATION WITH AUTISTIC STUDENTS**

Visual timetables, the use of gestures and visual cues help students with autism make sense of the world around them because they tend to be strong visual learners. There are many different approaches to teaching communication but we must ensure that the most relevant aspects are taught consistently so that the student gains meaning.

In consultation with Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs) classteachers write a communication profile for each student briefly outlining their preferred method of communication and how best to communicate with them.

Staff should be mindful of not bombarding students with language. The use of Makaton signing is promoted to increase students' access to learning. The use of key words and clear and minimal language with visual support will help the student to understand or take meaning from what is being said to them.

*(See 'Communication Policy' for full details of the school's approach).*

## **ORGANISATION OF TEAMS AND CLASSES**

Riverside provides 120 student places annually in 16 classes. Students are assigned to one of 3 teams according to student need and level of academic functioning.

| TEAM | NEEDS OF STUDENTS   | CURRICULUM  |
|------|---|-------------|
| 1    | Moderate learning difficulties  | FORMAL      |
| 2    | Moderate to Severe learning and communication difficulties  | SEMI-FORMAL |
| 3    | Profound and multiple learning difficulties and students with ASD who are operating largely at a sensory level with significant communication difficulties. | PRE-FORMAL  |

Students are grouped into one of sixteen core classrooms which form each student's core base for the year. Approximately two thirds of Riverside's population has a diagnosis of autism some classes are ASD specific whilst others cater for general learning difficulties including autism. Currently the school has 8 almost exclusively autistic classes, and 8 general learning difficulty

classes. From these core rooms students go with their class support assistants to their timetabled specialist lessons i.e. PE, art, music, D & T, Food Technology and ICT. Class sizes vary from six to ten according to levels of complexity of need. Similarly the number of assistants attached to classes varies from one to four.

## **RIVERSIDE'S CURRICULUM**

Students with autism follow a different style of learning that requires a considerable amount of direct instruction. Most students with autism are visual learners and need to see as well as hear information. Riverside's curriculum is autism-friendly with an emphasis on social, personal development and communication skills. It develops social interaction skills and social understanding alongside formal learning so that the students can continuously develop better communication strategies in order to have greater influence over their own lives.

Students who fall within the levels P4-P15 (formerly P-scale 4 to National curriculum level 4) follow mapped topics in all subjects, (P1-3 students follow a more holistic sensory curriculum). Each teacher delivers tailored schemes of work according to the learning styles of the students in the class. Both for the wholly-autistic specialist classes, and for individual autistic students better-placed in more general learning disability classes, outcomes are good because the work and teaching styles are informed by teachers' sound knowledge of autism, and in-depth grasp of each individual student's needs.

*(See 'Whole-School Curriculum Policy' and key stage schemes of work for further details).*

## **THERAPIES AT RIVERSIDE**

### ***Speech and language therapy***

Communication can be defined as a meaningful interaction between two or more individuals to request, resist, choose, comment and develop social relationships. The method of communication can take many forms. Riverside speech and language therapists, (SALTs) work closely with Riverside staff to deliver comprehensive individual and class communication programmes. The following aspects of communication are considered:

- Body language
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Gestures and pointing
- Signing (Makaton)
- Vocalisations
- Use of objects, photographs and symbols
- Use of High-Tech Voice Output Communication Aids, (VOCA) and other AAC devices
- Speech
- Writing

At Riverside staff, alongside SALTs, adopt a multi-modal 'Total Communication Approach'. This means that all methods of communication are recognised and valued equally as forms of interaction. Communication underpins all areas of the curriculum and allows students to access learning and develop social relationships

At Riverside we use a range of communication methods and approaches to develop communication e.g. Attention Autism, Intensive Interaction, PODD, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and specific measurable intervention in Live English (smiLE). We do not follow one approach only since the needs of the students vary between classes and age groups. However, many of these approaches are specific to learners with autism. We recognise that it is everybody's responsibility to have an understanding of the different methods of communication and to encourage students. To be effective communicators' staff must be effective listeners and observers. It is essential that approaches to communication with students with autism are consistently followed by all staff and carers working with the student, to ensure that maximum communicative function is achieved. This means that if a student is more able to communicate and understand photographs they should always have access to them. To this end all Riverside staff receive ongoing training in different aspects of communication from SaLTs or from staff with particular areas of expertise e.g. Intensive interaction, PODD, Makaton

### ***Music Therapy***

Music therapy, funded by a local charity, (The Tottenham Grammar School Foundation), is targeted for Riverside's autism students. It is a flexible approach, which has one or more of the following aims:

- To assess communication and interaction
- To help foster peer interaction, sharing and listening
- To help foster attention and focus
- To be freely creative within a musical structure; or
- To be able to find ways of expressing themselves through music.

Referrals arise mostly following a student's termly progress review meeting or annual review.) Students usually access music therapy individually, but sometimes a small group model is preferred. Music therapy can be on a short- or long-term or basis, according to need and demand.

During music therapy sessions students improvise music together with the therapist, within a basic framework of familiar songs or musical pieces. These songs are composed both to meet their individual characteristics and to bring them into new musical experiences. This means the students can be free and expressive of their emotions within a setting that is safe and consistent with wider school life.

In addition to music therapy some individual students with autism have access to guitar, drums and piano lessons with a music tutor for a session per week. The tutor is funded through the FSM, (Free School Meals), Pupil Premium funding, or parent personal funding. We also have a school rock band (lead by a SNA with expertise in this area) for interested students to practice and perform in. The process of developing the confidence to perform in the band has a remarkably positive effect on their self-esteem and confidence. The band performs at whole school events, and at other schools and functions.

### ***Occupational therapy***

The Riverside curriculum covers the development of the integration of the senses to ensure that the students are ready for learning. The sensory curriculum is extended and integrated throughout the week. The Occupational Therapist (OT) has the main role in assessing the students and leading the intervention, but it is the responsibility of every member of the multi-disciplinary team to ensure that they understand and consider each student's sensory processing difficulties in their practice.

Each student, including all those with ASD, who has sensory processing difficulties has a user-friendly sensory profile in class written by the classteacher in consultation with the OT, visible to all, to ensure that there is a consistency of approach with the student. Some individuals require a more in-depth analysis of their sensory needs. In these cases the following methods are may be used when assessing the student:

Sensory Profile by Winnie Dunn, Ph.D. (1969)

- (i) *The Caregiver Questionnaire completed by the parents of the student.*
- (ii) *The School Companion Questionnaire completed by class staff.*
- Informal Assessment of the student
- Observation in a variety of settings, i.e. classroom, playground, home.
- Liaison with parents and class staff

Following the assessment, the intervention may include:

- A school and home sensory programme
- A sensory diet
- Group or individual participation
- Changes to the environment  
The use of specified equipment, e.g. ear defenders, vibrating pillow, move-n-sit cushions, chewy tubes, there band, sensory toys which aid self-regulation, switches.

**Art therapy**

Riverside commissions two art therapists from 'Respond', annually to work mainly with our students with autism. Respond is a registered charity which provides various types of psychotherapy to people of all ages with a learning disability using the Attachment-based Systems Approach. Referral routes at Riverside are normally through the school's MDT fortnightly meeting framework.

Art therapy integrates psychotherapeutic techniques with the creative process to improve mental health and well-being. Art therapists may use a variety of art methods including drawing, painting, sculpture and collage.

Students who have experienced emotional trauma, anxiety or other psychological issues can benefit from expressing themselves creatively.

In most art therapy sessions, the focus is on the student's inner experience – her/his feelings, perceptions and imagination.

**Other interventions – Attachment Aware Project**

Children make better progress when they feel safe, appreciated and valued. Best practise with ASD students was explored. During 2015/2016 Riverside School was invited to participate in research in association with Bath Spa University which was intended to provide evidence of the links between Improved mental health and academic achievement. The school received support and training throughout the year from Kate Cairns Associates, leaders in the Attachment Aware field, in order to monitor achievement resulting from adopting the Attachment Aware principles of Acceptance, Empathy and Respect for the individual. The Attachment Aware project focusses support for our students in care and those who are particularly vulnerable, most of which had a diagnosis of ASD. The project works on providing:

| <u>Opportunity to Reflect</u>                           | <u>Opportunity for Self Expression</u> | <u>Opportunity to highlight Emotional Literacy in the Classroom</u>  | <u>Opportunity to develop Social skills</u>  |
|---|--|--|--|
| _(ranging from discussion/symbol selection/video diary) | (for creative expression)              | Enhanced/improvement of an existing class activity/routine/lesson in order to specifically address the emotional literacy aspects of the session | – an opportunity for the students to make a real choice about spending time communicating/sharing an experience with another student/staff member positively |

### **Rebound Therapy**

Rebound Therapy allows students to experience the stimulating feedback from the dynamic movement of bouncing on a trampoline. It's particularly useful for people on the autistic spectrum who tend to have vestibular and/or proprioceptive issues due to sensory integration problems. This can often impact on behaviour and learning, especially for those who have problems self-regulating. Trampolining is a highly sensory activity that provides a lot of stimulation and sensory feedback. It's as if the simple action of bouncing organises the body and its senses. Students are often more relaxed and happy after using the trampoline. It's a fun activity that enables students to move and exercise and also, if they use the trampoline in tandem with staff or peers, another context in which to relate to others. As well as the obvious health benefits associated with exercise it can support students to develop better control over gross motor skills and their postural balance.

### **Equine Therapy - horse riding**

A relatively new field, animal assisted therapy is slowly gaining credibility as its benefits are being researched and documented. Under its umbrella, equine therapy is becoming more popular as the benefits it offers to children on the autistic spectrum are being recognised. Some argue that it is more effective than other forms of animal therapy. The calming motion of the horse's movement, the tactile stimulation offered by the horse's coat and mane, the aid to improved motor functions as children learn to ride and groom the horses, have all been recognised as playing a part in supporting children on the autistic spectrum to develop a range of skills. For children with more complex autism, proponents of equine therapy suggest that being able to bond with horses – as some autistic children appear more readily able to do – supports them to better bond with the people in their lives.

### **EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE**

The Educational Psychology Service is employed by the Local Authority to offer a service to Riverside school in working with staff, students and families. Riverside school is given an allocated number of visits per year (this year, 6 mornings) and it is jointly negotiated how this time is used. The school is also able to buy in additional Educational Psychology visits when required.

The Educational Psychologists, (EPs), frequently work with a number of students with autism at Riverside, drawing on their own professional training and expertise; running training sessions for school staff on Functional Behavioural Analysis to help them to analyse complex behaviours in more detail; observations at school of students; consultations with classteachers and parents to help understand students' needs and assist them in planning interventions; individual assessment of their needs using assessments such as the ADOS (Autistic Diagnostic Observation Schedule); attending Annual Reviews.

The EPs for Riverside have jointly developed with the school a staged process of assessment for the students where there is a query about an autistic condition but no diagnosis. This involves: exploring concerns of the teacher or professional; taking these to the Multi-Disciplinary Team Meeting where an action plan is made; if appropriate the Educational Psychologist will then become involved in working with other professionals such as the Speech and Language Therapists, classteacher and parent to explore evidence of needs and to gain a developmental overview of needs. This will then be sent to CAMHS for a referral. If a diagnosis is made, the EP may be involved in supporting the student and parents.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENCE**

### ***Independence skills***

For all students, but particularly with Riverside's students with autism, the development of independence is encouraged at all times and underpins much of the school's work in helping students prepare for later successful transition to adult life with each student's potential for independence and autonomy released and embedded.

Opportunities for the development of independence skills include:

- Carrying out occasional or regular tasks/jobs at school (e.g. collecting the register)
- Independent/guided choices of Friday afternoon clubs
- Independent travel training, (delivered by the school's accredited travel-trainer)
- Cycle-training, (delivered by accredited trainers from TfL – *Transport for London*)
- Residential school journey placements, including an international trip to Slovenia.
- A wide range of educational visits including sporting events and competitions, theatre trips and visits to a range of locations to widen the experience for our students of life outside of school.
- Formal off-site or internal work experience (for year 11's)
- Preparation for transfer to Haringey's Sixth Form Centre and other post-16 provision (for year 11's)
- Students' contributions to School Council
- Higher-functioning students' advocacy for the less able
- Participation in after-school and holiday clubs, especially at Team Spirit our extremely well regarded in-house after school and holiday provision
- Enterprise activities

### ***Leisure skills***

Leisure skills are skills that a person engages in to keep themselves occupied independently. Students with autism may not naturally engage in leisure activities and often need help to choose a preferred activity; they tend to favour solitary activities.

At Riverside these students are taught how to use games, play and use all types of leisure equipment as a start to developing these skills. This will follow the developmental areas of early interactive, functional, symbolic and pretend and social play. As preferred activities these can then be built into the rewards systems.

## **PHYSICAL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

### ***The built environment***

Riverside School is a new purpose-built secondary special school, collocated with Woodside School a highly regarded mainstream secondary school. Together with architects designs for Riverside were drawn up by a group very experienced in providing a building and facilities that were tailor-made to maximise success for students with autism, (although students with other types of difficulty have also benefited from the vision made real).

Examples of specialist facilities which are particularly well-suited to the school's autistic population include:

- Six classes with inner 'chill-out' rooms
- A hydrotherapy pool
- A dark room
- A cycle track
- Wide corridors with armchairs throughout downstairs
- A single unified calming colour scheme
- A therapists' base
- A soft play room
- A nurse's room
- A hall annexe with 'Omi' devices
- An ICT suite
- A sensory roof garden
- A mini-sports terrace
- A food technology room

### ***Classroom environments and routines***

Core classrooms are set up at the beginning of each year to best suit the needs of the student group concerned. Some will be stimulation-reduced with no 'clutter' and subdued lighting (i.e. low-arousal environments) – others may purposely be 'busier' (i.e. higher-arousal environments). Students are assigned to classes with this in mind.

Classrooms are zoned so that it is clear that different parts of the room are for different purposes e.g. formal classroom seating for table top work, soft chair area for relaxation and/or circle time, an ICT area, a reading area. Workstations are available for students who are easily distracted or those who need a defined space in which to carry out individual work.

Clear guidance through visual timetable and prompts always ease understanding, and regardless of the style of class layout, these features appear in all classes. Clear routines are represented by visual cues with cues to highlight when something has finished. This helps to make predictions about what is happening next.

Tasks have a clear beginning and end so that the student can identify when it is over and the next is beginning. The use of a 'surprise' symbol is encouraged to warn students of a change in routine.

## **TRAINING IN UNDERSTANDING AUTISM**

All staff new to the school have some initial Autism Awareness training as part of the school's induction package. Following this all staff at Riverside are offered training of various types throughout the school year according to recommendation/requests arising from their Appraisals. In addition, in-school training is conducted in groups or for the whole staff at regular intervals.

To grow staff understanding of autism, many staff have attended the 3-day TEACCH training course, Attention Autism courses and PODD, Makaton, Intensive Interaction and ELKLAN communication programmes which fit well with the methodology of effective communication with students with autism.

In-school training is led by the ASD lead teacher with support from therapists and Team Leaders.

## **DIAGNOSES OF AUTISM**

Occasionally during the time a student is at school the MDT and school staff may come to believe that a student without a formal diagnosis of autism should be assessed as to whether they meet the criteria. Providing a diagnosis at this later stage in a student's life can still be very beneficial for the student and her/his family's understanding of their difficulties and occasionally in accessing specific support. The school follows a specific pathway for requesting a diagnosis agreed by the Educational Psychology, Speech and language Therapy and CAMHS-LD service.

## **CO-MORBID CONDITIONS**

Riverside acknowledges that autism can co-exist with other genetic or developmental difficulties e.g. Down Syndrome, ADHD and/or mental health diagnoses. Therefore school staff are vigilant to such potential co-existence of conditions.

The school has a regular on-site clinic from the CAMHS-LD service and referrals to this service are considered frequently at the fortnightly MDT meetings.

## **INVOLVING PARENTS**

Riverside School operates a policy of parent partnership. This approach enables a two-way support which gives way to consistency and structure to learning. Parents can support school by their knowledge of their child and staff can support parents with strategies to support the student at home.

A positive relationship where school, professionals and parents can share openly predicated towards a successful partnership for the student. Information and support is offered to parents through, (among others), the following arrangements:

- Class/student timetables are sent home
- Home/school books enable daily information to be exchanged between home and school. Other parents prefer email contact.



- Meetings on individual key skills targets take place at every Parents Evening
  - Parent workshops and 'coffee mornings' are regularly held in school
  - Meetings and home visits with therapists and other members of the MDT are regularly set up e.g. to look at effective methods of communication within the home.
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