

What is Autism (AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER ASD OR AUSTISM SEPECTRUM CONDITION ASC)?

(Taken from The National Autistic Society)

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. One in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK.

Being autistic

Autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways. Like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses. Below is a list of difficulties autistic people may share, including the two key difficulties required for a diagnosis.

At the other end of the spectrum, some people with **Asperger Syndrome** or '**high-functioning Autism**' are very intelligent academically. They may go on to be successful in their chosen field. However, they still experience significant social and communication difficulties. Some children have other difficulties which are not directly linked to their ASD, such as Dyspraxia, Dyslexia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It's important to seek an assessment of any other conditions, as this affects the sort of support that will best meet your child's needs.

Social communication

Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand sarcasm or tone of voice. Other challenges include: taking things literally and not understanding abstract concepts, needing extra time to process information or answer questions, repeating what others say to them (this is called echolalia)


Social interaction

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard to navigate the social world. Autistic people may: appear to be insensitive, seek out time alone when overloaded by other people not seek comfort from other people, appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate, find it hard to form friendships.

Repetitive and restrictive behaviours

With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people. This is why they often prefer to have routines so that they know what is going to happen. They may want to travel the same way to and from school or work, wear the same clothes or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Autistic people may also repeat movements such as hand flapping, rocking or the repetitive use of an object such as twirling a pen or opening and closing a door. Autistic people often engage in these behaviours to help calm themselves when



they are stressed or anxious, but many autistic people do it because they find it enjoyable.

Change to routine can also be very distressing for autistic people and make them very anxious. It could be having to adjust to big events like Christmas or changing schools, facing uncertainty at work, or something simpler like a bus detour that can trigger their anxiety.

Over/ under sensitivity to light, sound, taste and touch

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. Many autistic people prefer not to hug due to discomfort, which can be misinterpreted as being cold and aloof.

Many autistic people avoid everyday situations because of their sensitivity issues. Schools, workplaces and shopping centres can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload. There are many simple adjustments that can be made to make environments more autism-friendly.

Highly focused interests or hobbies

Many autistic people have intense and highly focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge. A stereotypical example is trains but that is one of many.

Like all people, autistic people gain huge amounts of pleasure from pursuing their interests and see them as fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

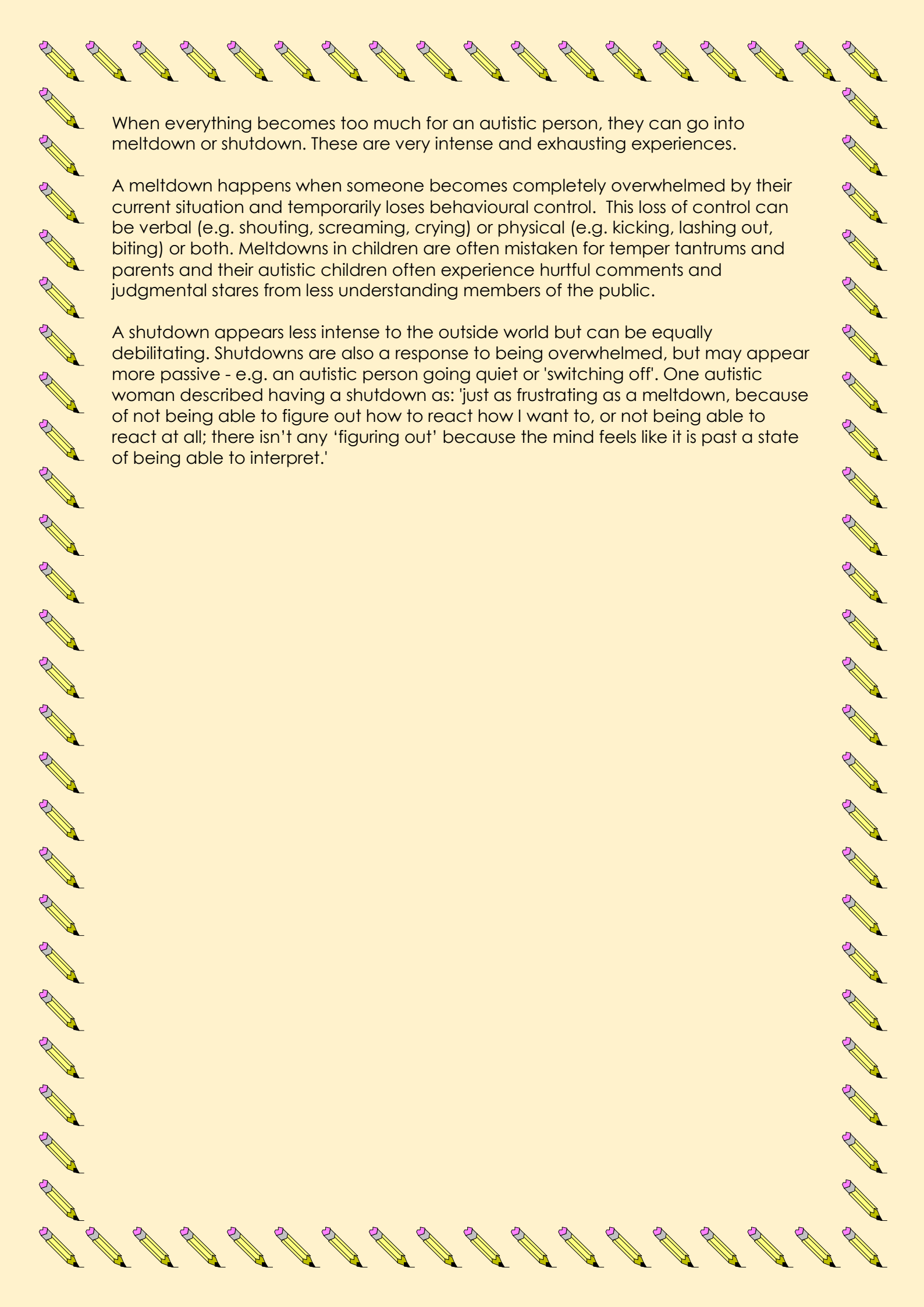
Being highly focused helps many autistic people do well academically and in the workplace but they can also become so engrossed in particular topics or activities that they neglect other aspects of their lives.

Extreme Anxiety

Anxiety is a real difficulty for many autistic adults, particularly in social situations or when facing change. It can affect a person psychologically and physically and impact quality of life for autistic people and their families.

It is very important that autistic people learn to recognise their triggers and find coping mechanisms to help reduce their anxiety. However, many autistic people have difficulty recognising and regulating their emotions. Over one third of autistic people have serious mental health issues and too many autistic people are being failed by mental health services.

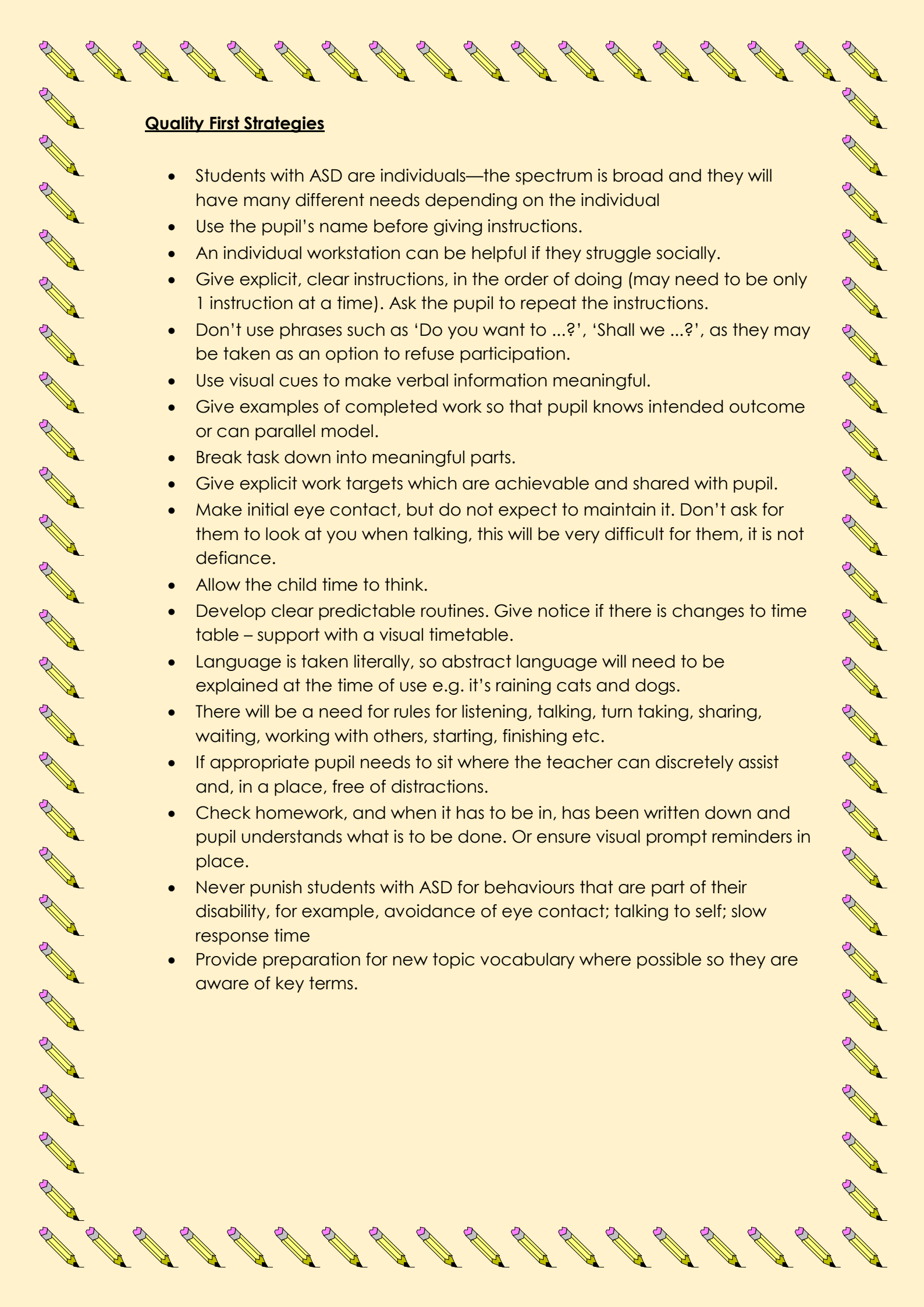
Meltdowns and shutdowns



When everything becomes too much for an autistic person, they can go into meltdown or shutdown. These are very intense and exhausting experiences.

A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be verbal (e.g. shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (e.g. kicking, lashing out, biting) or both. Meltdowns in children are often mistaken for temper tantrums and parents and their autistic children often experience hurtful comments and judgmental stares from less understanding members of the public.

A shutdown appears less intense to the outside world but can be equally debilitating. Shutdowns are also a response to being overwhelmed, but may appear more passive - e.g. an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'. One autistic woman described having a shutdown as: 'just as frustrating as a meltdown, because of not being able to figure out how to react how I want to, or not being able to react at all; there isn't any 'figuring out' because the mind feels like it is past a state of being able to interpret.'



Quality First Strategies

- Students with ASD are individuals—the spectrum is broad and they will have many different needs depending on the individual
- Use the pupil's name before giving instructions.
- An individual workstation can be helpful if they struggle socially.
- Give explicit, clear instructions, in the order of doing (may need to be only 1 instruction at a time). Ask the pupil to repeat the instructions.
- Don't use phrases such as 'Do you want to ...?', 'Shall we ...?', as they may be taken as an option to refuse participation.
- Use visual cues to make verbal information meaningful.
- Give examples of completed work so that pupil knows intended outcome or can parallel model.
- Break task down into meaningful parts.
- Give explicit work targets which are achievable and shared with pupil.
- Make initial eye contact, but do not expect to maintain it. Don't ask for them to look at you when talking, this will be very difficult for them, it is not defiance.
- Allow the child time to think.
- Develop clear predictable routines. Give notice if there is changes to time table – support with a visual timetable.
- Language is taken literally, so abstract language will need to be explained at the time of use e.g. it's raining cats and dogs.
- There will be a need for rules for listening, talking, turn taking, sharing, waiting, working with others, starting, finishing etc.
- If appropriate pupil needs to sit where the teacher can discretely assist and, in a place, free of distractions.
- Check homework, and when it has to be in, has been written down and pupil understands what is to be done. Or ensure visual prompt reminders in place.
- Never punish students with ASD for behaviours that are part of their disability, for example, avoidance of eye contact; talking to self; slow response time
- Provide preparation for new topic vocabulary where possible so they are aware of key terms.