

AUTISM & THE FAMILY COURT

A GUIDE FOR SECURITY, USHERS & COURT STAFF

Autism is a developmental condition which affects the way that people communicate with others and interact with the world around them. Around 1% of the UK population has an autism diagnosis, and many more people may be undiagnosed.

Every aspect of a family court visit can be different for an autistic person compared to a non-autistic person.

For example, they may be **unable to explain** who they are there to see, or to answer your questions.

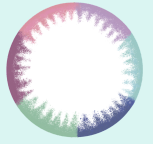
The court building will be **unfamiliar**, which may mean that an autistic person is experiencing **high levels of anxiety** when they arrive.

Many autistic people are family court users, and often **YOU** will be the first person that they meet when they arrive at **court**.

DISCLOSURE OF DIAGNOSIS: While disclosing a diagnosis of autism can lead to positive adjustments, it may also have negative consequences due to enduring stigma and unfounded stereotypes. Typically, it will be up to the autistic person to decide whether or not to disclose their diagnosis within the family court process.

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Autism is a wide-ranging spectrum and every autistic person is **unique**, however many autistic people will experience the following:

DIFFICULTIES WITH SOCIAL COMMUNICATION



Autistic people may find it challenging to start or maintain a conversation, to read body language or gestures, or to understand non-literal language such as expressions like 'it's raining cats and dogs'. Autistic people may also display unusual eye contact, either constantly looking away or looking intently at you. They may make comments or behave in ways perceived as inappropriate which could be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

- Speak in short, simple sentences – use simple, literal language.
- Give people time to process the information you are providing – be patient as you may need to wait for a reply.
- Consider giving someone the option to communicate in other ways e.g., write it down.



RESTRICTIVE, REPETITIVE BEHAVIOURS

Many autistic people have a preference for routine, and deviating from this routine can cause great distress. Some autistic people will make repetitive body movements.

- Try to give information about what is expected of the individual, e.g. when going through security. More information upfront will help to reduce anxiety.
- Where possible, allow visits to relevant court rooms, waiting areas, etc. in advance of their hearing.



ALTERED SENSORY SENSITIVITY

Autistic people often experience sensory information (i.e., lights, sounds, touch, smells) differently from non-autistic people. For example, some may find bright lights or certain sounds painful.

- Sunglasses / headphones may be essential to cope with the court environment – if you need them to be removed, explain why and how long for (keep this to a minimum).
- Make reasonable adjustments e.g., make a private waiting room available or use a court room with natural light.

REMEMBER INDIVIDUALITY: Everyone is different. Feel free to ask someone what they need and understand that in many cases the challenges that people face are 'hidden' i.e., severe anxiety or sensory overload.