

# The Birthday Party: film script

## Purpose of the film

- The purpose of this short film is to assist professionals to recognise the signs of autism and the various ways in which they present.
- It is part of the range of information provided by the Welsh Government in relation to referral for diagnostic assessment <http://asdinfoales.co.uk/>
- The film follows three fictitious characters, demonstrating how each sign may present in three very different ways. Other variations in presentation are also possible.
- The film focuses on recognition of the signs of autism. It **does not** describe all the experiences associated with autism (including the many strengths), the cause of these or how to offer support.
- Information and training about all these aspects is available from this and other websites.

## The Birthday Party: A film to help front-line professionals to identify the signs of autism in children

The aim of this film is to increase awareness of the signs of autism and the different ways they can show themselves in different children.

Today is Amy's birthday. Amy shows subtle signs of autism. Like many girls, her symptoms are easy to miss. She loves to spend time with her collection of toy ponies.

Her brother, Jack, displays more obvious, classic signs of autism, preferring his own company to that of others. Trains are his thing.

One of the party guests is Rhys, who also displays signs of autism. Appearing outwardly confident, he sometimes seems to be unaware of the needs of others. He knows a lot about cars and wants to tell everyone all he knows about this one.

Individuals on the autism spectrum have difficulty with social communication and interaction, and restricted or repetitive behaviours and thought patterns. The **SIGNS** of autism often get missed. Sometimes they are obvious but sometimes they're more subtle. **SIGNS** of autism show themselves in a variety of different ways and there are 5 particular **SIGNS** of autism to be aware of. So keep in mind....Differences or impairments in **S**ocial interaction and verbal communication and in **I**magination, and in **G**estures or non-verbal communication. Also a **N**arrow range of interests and unusual **S**ensory responses. (*On screen graphic*)

### Differences or difficulties in

- (1) **S**ocial interaction and verbal communication
- (2) **I**magination
- (3) **G**estures or non-verbal communication
- (4) **N**arrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours
- (5) **S**ensory responses

We need to recognise and understand the signs when they appear, and we need to take note when individual signs cluster together to make a pattern.

Amy's birthday party is getting under way, but already, we can see that Amy seems somewhat detached from the group and not really interested in most of her presents – until one of the girls, Olivia, gives her a toy pony. Now Amy responds positively, not only because she likes the toy pony but because she would love to be friends with Olivia, more than anyone else. When her Mum asked Amy who she would like to invite to her party, Amy suggested Olivia but could not think of who else to ask, so her Mum has had to ring round other parents to invite the other children too.

## **(1) SOCIAL INTERACTION AND VERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Social interaction and verbal communication show themselves in different ways in different children. We need to think about different **qualities** of social interaction when we look at the child's interest in others, their skills in communicating and their awareness of others, especially in others' feelings.

Some children are simply not interested in others, like **Jack**, who avoids social contact, moves away when others are playing near him and doesn't join in any activity. Jack's skills in verbal communication differ greatly from that of his peers.

Most of his verbalisations are phrases from the television, and he repeats these phrases over and over again... such as *"You're a really useful engine Thomas."*

His social style can be described as **aloof**, neither responding to nor seeking social interactions.

Amy's Mum has planned a game of Animal Charades to get the party going and most of the children like the sound of this.

But **Rhys** believes that there is a proper and correct way to play the game, and this is where his difficulties with social interaction become more obvious. Unlike Jack, he **is interested** in other children, but he makes one-sided approaches. He's skilled verbally, and happy to talk confidently about his interests but he talks 'at' others, taking a dominant role. He doesn't seem to listen or show sensitivity to others, insisting that other children play the game and do things his way. His social style can be described as **active but unusual** - Actively seeking social interaction but social approaches are on his own terms.

**Amy**, like Rhys is **also interested** in social interaction, but her social impairment is different. She wants to join in and be accepted but feels awkward and unsure in social situations. She's not as fully skilled in communicating and she's passive in her interactions with others. Her Mum persuades her to join in, and places her to stand next to Olivia to encourage their friendship.

Olivia accepts a drawing. Amy, still unsure copies or mimics the action.

Amy finds group games challenging but copes by copying others, making it hard for others to see she is struggling. Although she calls a lot of her classmates, friends, she's usually on the fringes of the social group. She struggles to work out how other people are feeling and isn't always sure how to respond with sympathy and affection.

Amy has what's known as **passive social style**, not initiating social interactions but responding to others.

Something we need to consider especially is **awareness of others**, for example, the way in which a child seeks comfort when hurt and also offers comfort to others.

The noise level is too much for Jack and as he tries to move away from the group he falls over and hits his head. It is really quite a nasty fall, but he cries only very briefly and doesn't seek comfort from his dad who's nearby.

**Rhys** sees what's happened but appears ambivalent and doesn't make any attempt to offer Jack comfort. **Amy**, on the other hand, does try to offer comfort but she does it awkwardly. She's learned that when someone is hurt or upset you do something like offer a plaster or a drink or touch the person's shoulder and ask if they're OK.

In these 3 children, we see varied behaviours that indicate **difficulties with social interaction and verbal communication**. Of course, the way in which each child presents is very different but there are behaviours we can look out for: *(on screen graphic)*

- **An avoidance of social interaction with other children, or interaction is unusual in some way.**
- **Little communication, or communication is one sided or unconventional**
- **A reduced awareness of others' feelings OR an unusual reaction to those feelings**

## **(2) IMAGINATION**

Many autistic children do not initiate **imaginative play** (e.g. pretence with others), and for those who do, the quality of their imaginative play may differ from their peers.

**Jack** doesn't demonstrate any imaginative play. He plays with toys by arranging objects in lines and patterns, but he has no interest in make-believe imaginative play.

On the surface, **Rhys** appears to be engaging in imaginative play with peers and even **sharing** pretend ideas with others.

But notice that he is directing the game, including the parts everyone plays, so that it has the same repetitive theme of his own interest. This control of the game helps him manage. We can see that he's not sharing imaginative ideas and his play is not as flexible as his peers.

Even though he struggles with social imagination and with generating joint ideas with others, however, he can be inventive and creative when engaging in his own preferred interests alone and in familiar environments

Amy also engages in imaginative play. She is often seen playing with her toy ponies. On the surface, this appears to be typical for a girl of her age. However, her play is restricted to these toys and she often re-enacts the same scenarios over and over again. She also prefers solitary imaginative play and doesn't try to share her interest with other children or even adults, even when she receives a present of a new pony.

Amy's difficulties in this area can also be seen when she tries to join in certain games with other children. She struggles to generate her own creative ideas in certain games, and often misunderstands pretend play.

So, when looking **at imaginative play** (e.g. pretence with others), we can observe one or more of the following: *(on screen graphic)*

- **A child may not play imaginatively with model toys, dolls, objects as if they are real (pretend play).**
- **Imaginative play is sometimes very repetitive and/or solitary.**
- **Imaginative activities with others may lack an equal sharing of creative ideas.**

### **3. GESTURES AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Autistic children show different styles of nonverbal communication such as gestures.

We need to think about the infrequency of gesture, and also about the way that gestures are coordinated with verbal communication and body language.

We should also dispel the myth of eye contact. Children with autism may or may not give eye contact, and again we need to consider how this is coordinated and modulated.

At Amy's birthday party, the children are having fun playing with bubbles. To start, Amy's Mum shows them how to blow bubbles. Most of the children are pointing to the bubbles in the air. When she stops for a moment to ask if they want her to continue, they use gestures such as nodding and clapping their hands enthusiastically to encourage her to go on.

**Jack** however displays no conventional gestures. He doesn't nod or shake his head or beckon to indicate someone to come here. He doesn't point to share his excitement about the biggest bubbles with anyone else. But he **is** excited and his way of showing it is to jump up and down making a noise and flapping his hands.

Now the children are having a go at blowing their own bubbles.

**Rhys** does well but he has difficulty in coordinating his nonverbal communication. He gets too close to others, and doesn't coordinate his eye contact with his pointing.

**Amy** has learned to use various gestures, and she copies the way the other children are holding their hands up to their mouths and blowing. But she lacks spontaneity in expressing emotion, especially in showing sympathy or in showing pleasure in another child's success.

So in terms of **gestures and nonverbal communication**, we can look out for: (*on screen graphic*)

- **An infrequent use of gestures.**
- **Gestures are used but they lack spontaneity, and may be immature or inappropriate.**
- **A reduced coordination of gestures with other forms of communication**

### **4. A NARROW RANGE OF INTERESTS, ROUTINES AND REPETITIVE BEHAVIOURS.**

Many children prefer certain objects or activities, but these preferences frequently change and the child is flexible in engaging with different activities. Children on the autism spectrum have a strong preference for sameness and repetition in their interests and behaviours.

**Jack** has many restricted, repetitive behaviours such as upper body rocking, spinning and lining up objects. He also has a special interest in trains.

**Rhys** has a special interest in cars – their models and number plates – which is all - consuming and repetitive. He collects facts about cars and talks about them all of the time.

**Amy** has a large collection of toy ponies. This is less obviously narrow and repetitive, because she doesn't talk about them all the time and she does engage in other activities. However, when Amy is left to choose her own activity, she chooses to play with her ponies in the same way every time.

The absolute need for routine may also show up at mealtimes, in the form of food fads.

These food fads are not just fussy eating but are linked to an insistence on eating a small range of foods – the child may always want the same thing, presented in the same way every day. **Jack** will only eat one type of sandwich, cut in a star shape and presented on a particular plate and because of this, he won't eat any of the party food on the table. Luckily, Jack's parents already know what to do and they've prepared a special plate just for him.

So, in terms of a **narrow range of interests, routines and repetitive behaviours**, we need to be aware of: *(on screen graphic)*

- **A narrow range of self-chosen interests.**
- **A dependency on routines and dislike of change.**
- **Repetitive motor behaviours.**
- **Insisting on eating only a small range of foods.**

## **SENSORY RESPONSES**

Many of us have sensory preferences, such as disliking loud venues or enjoying sleeping under a heavy quilt. However, children with autism often display unusual sensory responses.

A child may demonstrate sensory seeking or sensory avoiding behaviour or, as with **Jack** - both. He is sensitive to loud noises and, experiencing sensory overload, he reacts by covering his ears. On the other hand, his sensory seeking behaviours include studying his trains from different angles and also his liking for self-spinning. We've seen Jack demonstrating another unusual sensory response— his insensitivity to pain, when he fell over and hurt his head.

Rhys and Amy also display sensory seeking behaviour.

**Rhys** plays endlessly with his Top Trump cards and he also likes to see the light reflecting off their shiny surface.

**Amy** particularly enjoys stroking the fur on her toy ponies, and just handling them in all sorts of different ways. She can carry on doing this for hours.

So, in terms of **sensory responses**, look out for: *(on screen graphic)*

- **A high sensitivity to sounds, light, touch, smell or taste - sensory avoiding behaviour.**
- **An unusual interest in sensory aspects of objects - sensory seeking behaviour.**
- **A lack of sensory reactions and responses (e.g. to pain, temperature, sound).**

Autism does not have to be seen as a problem. It is important to respect and value the differences in behaviour and to recognise the positive aspects of being autistic such as attention to detail, memory and dedication to specialist skills.

However, the world can bring many challenges for autistic individuals and many have extreme and enduring lifetime difficulties. Many would not be able to go to parties like Amy's.

But all children respond to their needs being recognised. Therefore, recognising the signs is essential so that you can **adapt** your behaviour in order to support the child.

Some of these behaviours are seen in all children. So we need to look for 'patterns' and 'clusters' of behaviours that occur together to signpost autism. Consider how frequently the behaviours occur, how repetitive they are and how intense are the reactions.

Every child is different. Think about the **whole child** across **all their skills** and **beyond** their everyday routines – in all environments.

Are there times when a child gets troubled – extreme reactions for seemingly no reason, intense responses, frequent repetition, behaviours seriously impacting on self and others - what's the pattern?

Look for inflexibility about change and difficulty with spontaneity, and for learned, rehearsed responses that do not seem natural or instinctive.

Be observant, look for the signs and respond to them. Help to meet the child's needs and help them to reach their potential.

### ***Birthday Party Film Script: Acknowledgements***

*The Birthday Party film project was supported by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (Cardiff University) and Welsh Government.*

*The script was written and produced by: Sue Leekam, Sarah Carrington, Johanna Manikiza, Catherine Jones and Judith Gould.*

*We thank Sarah Bunce, Nicky Hall, Suzie Tyack, Sarah Barrett and Sue Sheppard for help with the script development. Thanks to Emyr Jenkins and Iwan Jenkins, INJAN for Welsh translation.*

© Cardiff University