

# **The Access Centre**

**A handbook for parents,  
teachers and other  
professionals**



**Raynes Park High School**

**Autumn 2008**

## **Introduction**

In September 2002 Raynes Park High School welcomed year 7 pupils for the first time as part of Merton LEAs reorganisation from a three tier to a two tier system of education for all schools. At the same time the Access Centre was established. This supports the school in its aim of enabling pupils on the Autistic Spectrum to benefit from the curriculum facilities at the school. They will have access to the full range of lessons, activities and amenities including the 'state of the art' Technology facilities brought about by the school's successful bid for technology status in the summer of 2002.

The Access Centre at Raynes Park High School is Merton LEA's specialist, secondary provision for pupils on the Autistic Spectrum. Pupils attending the Access Centre are expected to spend a proportion of their time within mainstream classes. The purpose of the Access Centre, as its name suggests, is to support pupils to access the curricular activities of the main school with the appropriate level of support, whilst providing a place, and staff expertise, for some very specific and individual needs. It will also provide a centre of expertise within the school enabling all staff to develop their ability to cater for the needs of these pupils.

When full, the capacity is 20 pupils, 4 in each year group. Prior to this date, pupils on the Autistic Spectrum (AS) were either maintained, usually with some support, in mainstream classes or went to special schools.

During the autumn term 2003, the Access Centre moved to purpose built premises on the site of Raynes Park High School. The new premises include three large classrooms, a dedicated speech and language therapy room, office and staff room as well as toilets and a cloakroom.

## **Pupils with ASD**

All of the pupils attached to the Access Centre have a statement of SEN describing Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). All students will have a diagnosis of ASD which might include Semantic Pragmatic Disorder, Autism or Asperger Syndrome.

Although it is important to see all pupils on the Autistic Spectrum (AS) as individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses like any other student, it is important to have an overview of the sorts of general difficulties these pupils are likely to have.

The central difficulty for these pupils is in social communication and interaction. They have difficulty with understanding social behaviour and conventions and behaving in a socially appropriate way. Most children learn these skills without having to be explicitly taught. Pupils with AS are very literal thinkers and interpreters of language and they fail to understand its social context. Linked to this is often a difficulty with comprehension, nuance and inference. Children with AS often find it difficult to play with other children who may be confused by their behaviour.

Apart from the lack of understanding with regard to social conventions, pupils with AS may also find it difficult to be flexible in their way of dealing with different situations. They find changes to routine difficult to handle and will need prior warning. They also have difficulty with seeing other people's points of view and may seem not to care. Their interests are often very narrow and fixed, even verging on the obsessive. They often have a very low tolerance threshold to certain sensory stimuli. So, for example, flickering lights, the hum of machinery or noisy crowds may well upset them. As can certain textures of clothes or food and smells. Others may not be aware of these distractions but they can be very stressful for the child with ASD and teachers and others need to be very aware of this. It can literally cause a sensory overload!

## Curriculum

All pupils attached to the Access Centre are entitled to a 'broad and balanced curriculum'. It is expected that the pupils will largely attend classes with their peer group with an appropriate level of classroom support to facilitate their access to the mainstream lessons.

In addition to the national curriculum, all pupils will also receive speech and language therapy and most of them will have additional Personal and Social Education and a Life Skills programme.

In order for staff of the Access Centre to deliver the additional curriculum, most pupils are withdrawn from some mainstream classes. These subjects continue to be delivered in the Access Centre but in a reduced amount of time. However, the curriculum delivery continues to evolve around the needs of the pupils. This gives staff the extra time necessary to deliver the additional curriculum which the pupils need.

Some pupils will have additional learning needs such as literacy or numeracy and these can be delivered in the Access Centre by specialist staff. The need for flexibility is paramount. Some pupils will need to do all their maths and English in the Access Centre and some may need to be withdrawn for a fixed period of time only in order to 'catch up'.

All pupils also have a 'keyworker session' in order to work on individual issues. The content of these sessions is likely to be identified through group social and life skills sessions. It could also be something which the pupil has identified. Bullying and teasing, for example will need to be dealt with specifically as pupils with an ASD become very distressed by situations and occurrences which other pupils may well take in their stride. What ever the event it must be taken very seriously and also used as a learning experience for the pupil who is helped to build strategies for the future.

## Key Stage 4

At the end of KS3 all pupils, along with the rest of the school, will choose their options for study and final examination at the end of Yr 11.

All pupils attached to the Access Centre will have the opportunity to study for as many GCSEs as they are able to manage. However, it is likely that the demands of the coursework will be such that most students will not study all the options. Instead they will spend more time in the Access Centre having support to help them with the exams they are working towards.

The annual review at the end of KS3 includes a transition plan and the Connexions service will attend in order to help facilitate the future plans for each pupil. This will set out the arrangements for college and/or future work placement.

During KS4 pupils will also have the opportunity, if appropriate, to attend an extended work placement. This will be for either one half or one full day each week and will form part of the life skills programme which all pupils will have the opportunity to follow.

## Teaching Strategies

These pupils will almost always have difficulty with processing spoken and written information.

- Slow down the pace of delivery
- Use direct, unambiguous language
- Whenever possible provide visual support
- Always use the pupil's name before giving an instruction
- Whenever possible give one instruction at a time

These pupils find it difficult to make rapid, conceptual links like other students and may well 'switch off' in class.

- Ask questions to check understanding
- If repeating an instruction always say it the same way – do not be tempted to re-phrase!
- Use a structured approach in your lesson with clear beginnings and endings to each task

Environmental factors may affect these pupils adversely. Lights, crowds, noise and particularly changes to routine may upset them.

- Try to seat them away from as many distractions as possible

- Always give as much warning as possible to even minor changes. A sudden assembly, fire drill or rearrangement of classroom furniture will have an enormous impact
- If lights are flickering or machinery humming it may be better to turn them off. Check with the pupil as the distraction may not be obvious to you
- It may be necessary to let pupils leave your lesson a few minutes early to avoid crowded corridors

Changing from whole class to pair or group work can be enormously challenging for the pupil with as ASD.

- Do not expect the pupil to know what to do when told to get into pairs or groups
- Select for them with sensitivity
- Give them a specific task
- Check they know exactly what is expected

In the right conditions pupils with an ASD can succeed, whether as a brilliant debater, an exceptional result in SATs/GCSE or managing to get selected for the school cricketing team. They need understanding more than anything!

In addition to these general strategies, each member of staff will receive an 'additional needs' profile for each ASD pupil they teach. These will outline the specific needs and appropriate strategies for the individual pupil. These profiles are written by Access Centre staff in partnership with parents and should give staff all the information they need.

## **Partnership with Parents**

Working closely with parents is the key to success for our pupils. Parents are the experts who know their child best and no decision is ever made without their full consultation and agreement.

Each pupil has an attached keyworker (see 'The role of the keyworker') who is responsible for regular communication with the parents through an agreed system. This might be a home/school book, regular telephone calls or a Dictaphone.

Parents are invited to all planning meetings whether they are annual reviews or IEP updates. Parents are also welcome to come at any other time with just a telephone call to arrange in order to make sure that they receive the proper time and attention that only prior warning can give.

A Parent Support Group meets on a regular basis. With the new premises it is hoped that the meetings can be arranged more often. Outside agencies can be invited to these as long as due notice is given to staff to arrange. It is also hoped that the parents themselves will take over the organising and running of these groups!

## **Speech & Language Therapy**

All pupils attached to the Access Centre have access to a speech and language therapist (SALT).

The therapist is provided by Sutton and Merton Primary Care Trust and she attends for two days each week. This allows us to offer all pupils both individual and group work.

The individual work is very clearly tailored to the needs of the individual pupil and the group work concentrates on social interaction and social language.

The pupils enjoy the SALT sessions and each person has the opportunity to work on any aspects of SALT which they have identified themselves. Access Centre staff attend these sessions so that they are able to use the strategies with the pupil throughout the week and keep parents regularly informed of progress.

## **The role of the Keyworker**

Each pupil in the Access Centre will have a Keyworker attached to him/her. This person will spend a proportion, but not all of their time with the allocated pupil. The aim is to foster independence through support, not a high level of dependency which is likely to occur if the student thinks that the keyworker is for him/her alone.

Specific aspects of the role will include the following:-

- Familiarise yourself with the pupil's file
- Build a positive relationship with individual pupil by making it clear what the keyworker role is
- Spend support time in class with the pupil
- Ensure that pupil has an up-to-date timetable
- Spend some informal time with the pupil out of class to allow for 'problem solving' (this is likely to be in conjunction with SALT)
- Attend SALT sessions
- Establish contact with parents on a regular basis by using a home/school contact book or other form of communication e.g. Dictaphone

- Make sure that homework diary is completed and that homework is also completed. Contact parents if necessary
- Ensure that pupil has all necessary equipment, particularly for DT
- Ensure that all teaching staff have a copy of the 'additional needs' form
- Keep a weekly record sheet of individual pupil's progress. This to be discussed with HoD and used to inform IEPs
- Update IEPs with parents as appropriate
- Attend and contribute to Annual Reviews

## Useful resources and Websites

Asperger's Syndrome – A guide for Parents and Professionals by Tony Attwood

Access and Inclusion for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders 'Let me in' by Matthew Hesmondhalgh and Christine Breakley

The Autistic Spectrum by Lorna Wing

Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome – A user guide to adolescence by Luke Jackson

Asperger Syndrome – A practical guide for teachers by Val Cumine, Julia Leach and Gill Stevenson

I am special – Introducing Children and Young People to their Autistic Spectrum Disorder by Peter Vermeulen

The New Social Story Book by Carol Gray

[www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

[www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)

[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

[www.talkingpoint.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.uk)