

Auditory Processing Disorder - How Parents Can Help

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- 1. Have your child tested.** APD is a problem with the way in which the brain processes sound and speech. It does **not** affect hearing. If you or any professional suspects that your child has APD, it is vital that you seek full diagnosis from a specialist audiologist as early as possible – you can get a referral from age 7 in the UK. Your child needs validation that it isn't their fault. They will be affected uniquely by APD and other conditions (which should also be identified and diagnosed) and they need to know how, and why they struggle.
- 2. What a child with APD needs most from their parents is their support and reassurance.** They will be confused and maybe anxious, both before and after diagnosis, also stressed and frustrated. They need you to tell them that everything will be OK and accept them just as they are. These are vulnerable children prone to bullying – be aware.
- 3. Be patient and sympathetic.** Your child can't help not following instructions or doing things as quickly as you want them to. APD means that they can't process/understand speech and this may be random and intermittent - sometimes they will seem OK, but they might understand little or nothing, especially when tired, stressed or unwell, or in sensory overload from a busy day at school. APD is an invisible disability.
- 4. Tell your child that they have APD.** Your child **needs** to know that they have APD and that they are not alone. There are many children and adults with APD, as many as 1 in every 20 children worldwide. They will need to know how they are affected uniquely by APD and other co-existing conditions. APD can co-exist with any number of other unrelated disabilities, conditions or difficulties, in fact it rarely exists in isolation. So keep looking till all difficulties are accounted for. Some children will realise that they find things a little more difficult than their peers, and that what they hear doesn't always make sense. Some will not notice but they will all need help from you to understand why. You owe it to them.
- 5. Tell your child that it isn't their fault.** It will help your child to know they are not lazy or stupid, just that they may need to learn things in a different way and need more time to process information. (If you were born with APD too, it is not your fault if your child has it as well – you can't help what you were born with. It is also not your fault if your child has acquired it).
- 6. Tell your child if you struggle too.** If you have problems with processing sound and speech, following verbal instructions etc. too, which is possible if the APD is inherited form, tell them that, and explain how you cope. Also tell them if you have any other conditions or difficulties. It will help them to see that if you can do it so can they can benefit from your coping strategies while they develop their own. Also seek diagnosis for yourself; validation is just as important for you as for your child.
- 7. Explain to your friends and family.** It is vital that they know that your child has a problem in processing what they hear. Encourage them to accept it and make allowances and adjustments to help your child. **Your child needs their help too.**

- 8. Help your child to learn about APD.** Find out as much as you can about APD to help your child understand what it means, that it is for life, but with their own coping strategies and understanding and support from friends, family and school they will be able to cope. Also pass on information to your child's school so they can help too. APD is a neurological condition and it does not just affect education – it affects socialisation and communication and will also affect them in work. Children with APD become adults with APD. APD is for life and cannot be cured.
- 9. Make sure your child is looking at you when you speak.** Turn off the TV or find a quiet place to talk – background noise affects processing (speech gets lost in the noise). Face the child when you speak to ensure they have a chance to lip-read if they need to, or read facial cues, expressions, body language etc. Asking them to repeat back to you what you said might not ensure that they have understood. Write things down. Also **don't give more than one instruction at a time**. Your child may not remember them all, or might not remember them in the right order.
- 10. Ask your child what they find helpful.** Even a young child will have developed some natural coping strategies and it will help you to know what they are so you can help them better. E.g. find out how your child prefers information to be repeated. If they cannot understand the first time, some prefer a straight repetition using the same words, others prefer it reworded differently. Speaking louder will not help, but speaking clearly will.
- 11. Try not to interrupt or hurry your child.** If they are telling you something, they may take time to think of the right words (word retrieval issues) and if interrupted they can forget what they were saying altogether or have to start again from the beginning of the story, which can be very distressing. Let them get to the point in their own time.
- 12. Many children with APD need routine.** Familiarity and order can sometimes help them cope with the world around them, help them to keep to these for some sort of security. They need structure to their day, so they don't feel so out of control. The need for routine and control brings them comfort. It doesn't mean they have autism, it is a coping mechanism born from feeling out of control. Some people with APD are also very disorganised, especially outside the normal daily routine, (as in school holidays), and may feel a little lost when not at school, so a home routine is helpful.
- 13. Let home be a safe place to vent.** It isn't your child's fault if they get upset, angry or frustrated; home should be a safe place where they can vent and let off steam. It often takes all they have to keep it together at school and the pressure on them is enormous – it's hard enough for an adult to cope with, let alone a child – and they can be afraid to lose control, especially when teachers don't understand the reasons behind it. This is not a naughty child or one with a behaviour problem, it is a necessary release because of lack of adequate support, sensory overload and frustration. They need to express their feelings in some way, even if they can't do it verbally. At home they need to relax after a busy day, and they also need peace and quiet, and plenty of rest to allow for delayed processing and recuperation.

- 14. Help your child to self-advocate.** Encourage your child to tell their friends and other family members that they need time to process what is said, that people need to look at them when they speak etc. or whatever measures they have found that help them to cope. People can't help if they don't know these things. Self-advocacy is also vital at school and later in the workplace, so the sooner they learn this skill the better.
- 15. Ways to help your child with homework.** Your child may need to have information presented differently for them to process it. If they are having problems understanding what they have to do, try writing instructions out in a different way for them. Try to present information in a way that you know they will understand. Draw pictures, it need not be anything too artistic, just stick men or doodles to get the point across, or find pictures on the internet or in magazines. Use incidents and familiar experiences, items from around the house as examples. Multi-sensory online games (many are free) or interactive CD-ROMs can help a lot here, especially with maths. Reinforcement helps some children, but **not** all.
- 16. Your child might be too tired to do homework, or in sensory overload.** If that is the case, nothing more will be learned - by the time they get home, their senses may be too overloaded to process efficiently or to take any more in. A child with APD needs to rest after school in quiet surroundings; they need time overnight to process new information in order to remember it, and to refresh their brain to start again the next day and use what was learned. Ask the school to keep homework to a minimum. Some parents stop their children doing homework (not a legal requirement in the UK and although it might be part of your school rules, for children with disabilities it should be appropriate to the age and ability of the child, accessible and suitably differentiated at all times, and the amount should be negotiable).
- 17. Don't help a child TOO much with homework. If your child can't do the work, it might be because it's too hard for them.** There is a temptation to do it for them, or complete unfinished work so the child won't get into trouble. If they haven't processed/understood the lesson at school, or if there are gaps in their knowledge, they won't be able to do the homework. You need to tell the teacher that. Their school notes, which they may need to work from, might well be incorrect or incomplete if they made them themselves. Insist on provision of written notes from all lessons; they need them at least the day before as pre-teaching so that they can familiarise themselves with new words and information beforehand which means the information is more familiar and they might retain more from the lesson - and have complete notes to work from at home and to revise from for tests and exams. Education is not about learning how to take dictation, copy things down or make notes. It is understanding the information taught and being able to learn, remember, recall and reproduce it appropriately when questioned.
- 18. Boost your child's confidence and self-image.** Encourage your child to be happy with who they are. Acceptance of APD by themselves and others is the biggest thing to overcome. APD can bring many problems, but it will also bring compensations in other areas, and you should help your child to discover what these might be. A positive self-image and self-confidence are the best gifts a child with APD can have, and often what they lack.

- 19. Help your child with social skills.** Encourage your child to pay attention to body language and facial expression as social cues to aid processing. Also role play at home can help ease embarrassment in social situations. Encourage them to make mental reminders that if one approach fails, or something doesn't come out right, they can reword it and try again, or if they don't understand they can practise asking people if they could please repeat things or reword what they have said etc. As they get older it might help to rehearse conversations beforehand.
- 20. But don't force your child to make friends or attend social events if they don't want to.** They will find the pressure too great. Don't make them join after-school clubs, or go out or do lots of things at weekends – they need time to just rest, process and recuperate. People with APD often actively seek solitude to avoid stressful situations; let them do so whenever at all possible. They may be happy with just one or two good friends who understand them, or they might have no friends. They will expand their social circle at their own pace - often online to avoid in-person difficulties. But APD can be socially isolating by the very nature of the difficulties they face, so if they want friends and have a lot of problems with miscommunication, as mentioned earlier, assistance with social skills might help.
- 21. Be educated about APD and get ready for a battle –** Don't assume that everyone involved in your child's education and health care will know what APD is - until it is widely recognised in the UK, you will have to explain. You are your child's advocate as well as their parent; learn as much as you can so you can educate other people about APD. Learn how it affects your child so that you can work out what accommodations they will need to support them best and fight for them. At the moment, support for children with APD is not automatic or readily given – unless you're very lucky or have a very supportive school or local authority, you will probably need to fight every step of the way, from seeking a diagnosis to getting appropriate accommodations at school. An EHC Plan might be the only way to guarantee any help, and even then you will need to make sure it contains all the things your child needs to support the APD and other co-existing conditions, and support their emotional and mental health needs.
- 22. Encourage their gifts, talents and interests.** All children need to know that they are good at something. For the child with APD this is particularly important. Everyone is good at something, no matter how trivial it might seem to someone else. They need to feel special and good about themselves because low self-esteem and poor self-confidence are very common in children with APD. There is also more to life than school.
- 23. Encourage your child's interests and strengths.** APD does not affect intelligence, but it can bring challenges in education. With full appropriate support, a child with APD can achieve academically, but if your child is not academically successful, even after all appropriate support is provided, it isn't the end of the world. People with APD are often quite talented in other ways. They might have artistic and hands-on skills, have an aptitude for music, can be very compassionate and empathic and go into the caring or teaching professions, and have a flair for entrepreneurship or anything that's creative or 'outside the box'. Encourage them to use what they love in order to make a living, forge a career or just help them to lead a happy and fulfilled life in whatever way they choose.