Central coherence is a perceptual process which involves the ability to focus on details as well as wholes. It allows one to understand the context of things and to ‘see the big picture’.

Kanner’s original description of Autism includes attention to detail and the ‘inability to experience wholes without full attention to the constituent parts’ as one reason for the insistence on sameness seen in individuals with autism. Uta Frith (1989) along with Francesca Happe’ (Uta and Happe’, 1994) have closely examined this area of information processing and note that typically developing children are able to process incoming information for the overall gist (gestalt form) to the extent that they may often pay less attention or memorise details. Individuals with autism, however, experience great difficulty in understanding the overall picture but can show remarkable skill in their ability to attend to as well as memorise details. Autobiographical accounts of autism which describe fragmented perception (Gerland, 1997 cited in Happe’ & Frith, 2006) have since supported the notion of weak central coherence or detail-focused processing.

Difficulties associated with weak Central Coherence include:

- **Idiosyncratic focus of attention** and inattentiveness to new tasks. The student with autism may allocate his/her attention in unusual ways and may not register large parts of salient information.

- **Difficulty prioritising** and choosing (Cumine, Leach & Stevenson, 1998).

- **An individual’s preference for the known and adherence to routines** is often considered as a sign of anxiety, however, it can also be attributed to weak central coherence where the individual has difficulty determining the patterns or coherence of life. Once a pattern has emerged, the individual may impose routines and rituals to maintain the same patterned order (Attwood, 1997).

- **Difficulties recognising what is relevant from the irrelevant in any given situation.**

- **Difficulties understanding the long term purpose of tasks and projects.**

- **Seeing connections** and generalising skills. Individuals with autism have difficulty creating concepts as they retain each example as separate unless it is exactly the same as the previous one. This renders the generalisation of concepts or skills very difficult (Plaisted, 2001; Rincover & Koegel, 1975 cited in Frith & Happe’, 2006).

**References:**

