

Supporting autistic children



More than one in 100 people have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Characteristics and traits tend to appear in the first two years of a child's life, and males are five times more likely than females to be on the autistic spectrum.

As an early years professional, you will meet children who may display behaviours indicating autism, but have not been diagnosed. However, some may have already had a diagnosis and others will start the diagnosis process while at nursery or school.

What is autism?

Autism is a spectrum condition that affects how someone communicates with and relates to other people and how they experience the world differently to those around them.

Autism affects people in different ways but all autistic people share certain difficulties. Some also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions which determines the level of support they need.

Understanding and relating to others, and taking part in everyday life can be more difficult. People on the autism spectrum wonder why they are not like others and believe their social differences mean people don't understand them.

The complexity of support needs can vary enormously from child to child as the term describes all types of diagnostic profiles, including Asperger Syndrome. Some parents of autistic children say others believe that their child is naughty as they don't appear 'disabled'.

Behaviours to be aware of

Autistic children display a wide range of behaviours which could include:

- Difficulty relating to others

- Difficulty understanding unwritten rules
- Difficulty communicating (some may communicate non-verbally)
- Difficulty with thinking flexibly e.g. how to cope when plans change.

You suspect a child has autism – what next?

Talk to the child's parents about any concerns with their development. Seek support from your SENCO; they will be able to help with strategies and next steps.

You can't seek intervention without parental consent so you will need to get them on board.

Use the local authority process for seeking further support, funding and training. Each LA operates differently.

Diagnosis

Many autistic children gain a lot from attending nursery as they can take part in their own way without the worry that they are different.

A diagnosis is usually given by a multi-disciplinary diagnostic team, often including a speech and language therapist, paediatrician, psychiatrist and/or psychologist after a GP referral.

A health visitor or GP could carry out a 'screening interview' or M-CHAT (Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers). This will help indicate whether a child may be autistic but is not a proper diagnosis.

Girls on the autism spectrum are often misdiagnosed or undiagnosed. It was

What challenges do autistic children face?



Communication difficulties - Children on the autism spectrum can experience a variety of communication difficulties



Differing sensory needs - Many struggle to process sensory information which can impact on their behaviour



Need for routine - Autistic children often need routine to help them understand their world and can find change difficult. The level of change which affects someone on the spectrum differs from child to child



Toileting problems - Some autistic children can find toileting tough; it is even more likely if the child also has a learning disability



Problems with eating - Mealtimes at nursery can be particularly difficult



Intense interests - Many autistic children will have one or more intense interests. They may talk repeatedly about a topic or favourite object



Meltdowns - Some children have "meltdowns" because they are unable to communicate what they want or express their feelings. They may also be overwhelmed by sensory stimuli or too much information



Play - Play can be difficult for children on the autism spectrum.

Effective Practice

We have noticed an increase in the number of children in early years on the autism spectrum and we are having to react.

We feel that there can be a reluctance to diagnose at this early stage, yet the experts and training show that the signs are there. We have also experienced a reluctance from parents and are often given other explanations for the signs we've noticed.

The observations on the child must reflect their developmental stage. Be honest and have evidence. Prepare support plans and be ready for those conversations. Local authority teams will not agree with your results if the child shows the right developmental stages, so what is it that you have observed and why, what does that mean for the child's outcomes?

You may have to wait some time for any multi-professional diagnosis but you can advise the family to see their GP. 1:1 support will be needed whilst you are waiting for help and hopeful funding. Try arrange for other children to have outdoor time whilst you manage this, or vice versa.

There must be a space which allows the child to exist without being labelled. Help other children understand that this child's particular behaviour is what he/she does; that sometimes extra help is needed; that he/she doesn't always understand and they can't stop themselves. Only discuss disruptive behaviour if it becomes an issue.

Children are very accommodating and forgiving and we must show them that all differences are welcomed.

Helen Gratton of Yorkshire Montessori Nursery Company

historically thought that girls were less likely to have autism but recent research has shown many challenges diagnosing autism in girls.

Autism can be diagnosed reliably from as early as two years old but not everyone is diagnosed in early life.

"Treat the child as an individual and not as their diagnosis. Plan around their needs, interests and stage of development as you would any child."

What can you do to help children?

There are many courses about autism available, some of which are fully funded, that can provide the information and training you need to be able to support a child in your setting.

Be sure to work closely with parents to ensure a consistent approach.

Some children may have other funding or support available to them.

Jo Baranek, NDNA Early Years Adviser, said: "Autistic children need to follow frameworks just like other children, even though they may have difficulties learning at the same pace or in the same way."

In England, settings can use the Autism Education Trust's early years autism standards and competency framework.

Treat the child as an individual and not as their diagnosis. Plan around their needs, interests and stage of development as you would any child.

Use visual routines and timetables to

communicate and help children on the autism spectrum learn a new routine in a structured, clear way. This will also benefit other children.

Consider those children who may have sensory processing disorder as part of their ASD and ensure there are not too many bright colours, strong smells or loud sounds in the setting. Nicola Wardropper, NDNA Early Years Adviser, said: "Think about your environment. Is it calm and orderly or a sensory overload? Noisy, busy environments can be very frightening and can cause them great anxiety. Noise levels can rise at specific times of the day, particularly when children are moving around or coming and going.

"Think about the layout; is it easy to manoeuvre round? Think about the colours in the environment; neutral shades are better than bright colours and promote a calmer atmosphere."

Provide calm and quiet areas for the children to retreat to. This is important for all children. Encourage staff to:

- Be aware of the child's needs and use known strategies and approaches consistently
- Be sure to use clear and simple language when communicating
- Offer rewards for good behaviour
- Be aware of any meltdown triggers.

Introducing a child on the autism spectrum to your setting

Make their introduction to nursery gradual so it doesn't overwhelm them. Before their first visit you could:

- Take photographs of the nursery and make a book
- Arrange a home visit and look at the book together
- Ensure that staff wear an ID badge so that children begin to recognise them

and their name

- Arrange for the child to visit without other children to introduce them to staff and your setting. Follow this up with other visits, gradually introducing them to other children.

Broaching the topic with parents

This is a sensitive topic which needs to be approached with care. Find somewhere private where you can talk without being interrupted or distracted. It is vital that the parents don't feel like something is wrong or that their child is in trouble.

The parents may have worries about their child too so this meeting may come as a relief. This topic can be very emotive so take time to talk through any concerns and have tissues on hand.

Talk about the concerns you may have about their child's development and



explain the different options. Every child is different and some children may need more support than others but the earlier support can be sourced, the better.

Parents and carers know their child best, use this to your advantage. They may have their own ideas about how to help their child feel more comfortable in the setting.

This article is supported by the National Autistic Society (NAS) - visit www.autism.org.uk to find out more.