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How children with ASD struggle with their social development in early years

As defined by National Institute of Mental Health (2024), autism spectrum disorder, also known as ASD, is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Autism can be diagnosed at any age and is described as a developmental disorder because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life. NHS (2022) states that there are 5 main signs of autism. These being they find it hard to understand what others are thinking or feeling, they get veery anxious about social situations, they find it hard to make friends or preferring to be alone, they seem blunt or rude and not interested in others without meaning to and they find it hard to say how they feel. This essay will be about the different research done about how ASD impacts children's social development in early years. This will be done by doing paper reviews on specific findings by different researchers and how they gathered this information.

Paper 1 - Understanding neurodiverse social play between autistic and non-autistic children.

The paper by Morris *et al.* (2024) is based on research about children with ASD and their struggle with developing socially. The paper found that a big barrier for children with ASD when trying to socialise is that they have a difference in communication styles. The paper also states that children with ASD have a desire to play on their own and that they also lack the social skills and ability to understand and follow ambiguous rules or societal norms. Raisingchildren.net.au (2024) supports this research stating that they don't typically try and get close to other children and are often happy focusing on their own activities. This

research is further supported by BlueGems (2025) state children with Autism generally aren't aware of how other people perceive how they are acting. The paper also shared that they found children with ASD struggle with emotional and sensory regulation. This research is backed by Sarris (2022) stating that children and teens with autism are four times more likely to have problems managing their emotions than other youth. This is due to sensory sensitivity, lack of communication skills and potentially their lack of knowledge of their emotions.

This paper gathered this research by doing interviews and observations. The researchers interviewed 6 adults and observed 36 children. Some of these children had ASD and some did not. These children were described as either neurotypical or neurodivergent. During observation, they found that when children with ASD played with neurotypical children, there was an increase in the neurodivergent Childs responsiveness. They also state it enhanced social orientation and cohesion, improved language skills, it fosters friendships, reduces loneliness, enhanced self-confidence and wellbeing. This study took place in 2024 in a primary school located in Bristol and the target audience was children aged between 4 and 12 years old. A critique of this paper is that the age range of the children were far too broad. Also, some of the children didn't have an ASD diagnosis. This is important as some observers may be bias and believe certain behaviours are due to their neurodivergences and not their own unique personality. BrightWheel (2025) supports this as it is important for observers to observe objectively as to avoid preconceived notions and unsupported conclusions.

Paper 2 - Social involvement of children with autism spectrum disorders in elementary school classrooms.

The paper by Rotheram *et al*. (2010 looked at the social involvements of children with ASD in elementary school classrooms. This paper found that Children with ASD have fewer friendships due to being less accepted by their peers. Autism Centre for kids (n.d) supports this as they state that children diagnosed with autism may feel that society doesn't accept them. the feeling of rejection comes from the fact that many people don't know or fully understand ASD. The research also showed that their ability to connect socially with others decreased as they went through each stage of early years. Tobik (2025) supports this by

stating that some children lose social development skills, while others lose both social development and language skills. This could be them forgetting the simple please and thank you that they learned early on in their school years, and due to their struggles with their social development they can potentially lose this understanding of social cues. Sherrell (2024) also states that autism regression typically occurs between 18 and 24 months, with the average age of 20 to 2 months. However, some children may lose skills at different school ages. The research also found that there is a lack of support for early interventions that would help support the children with ASD with their social skills and their integration into society. The conclusion was that there was too much Focus on the academic performances of the children with ASD and not their social involvements and communication skills. This research took place in 2010 and, whilst not stated, can be assumed to have taken place in the United States of America, due to the vocabulary used and the word elementary. The research was gathered by observation and questionnaires. The research involved observing 158 children, 79 of those with ASD and the other 79 without ASD. The age range of this research can be assumed as children between the ages of 6 and 11 years old. This is not stated but can be assumed due to the elementary school ages. A critique that this paper shares with the first is that the ages of the children are too broad and thus doesn't give us strong and accurate results. The children could be at different stages of development as each child develops at their own speed. This is supported by CHOC (n.d) stating kids grow at their own pace. This is due to genetics, gender, nutrition, physical activity, health problems, environment and hormones. Gowrie (n.d) states that Vygotsky's theory of children's cognitive development and learning ability can be guided and mediated by their social interactions. This suggests that children with ASD, that struggle with the social interactions, are unable to develop their cognitive and learning ability as well as neurotypical children. A critique of this paper is that it took place over a decade ago and it may not be accurate in today's world. Autism Speaks (2024) states that adults and children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder has increased by 175% over the last decade. This suggests that not only has there been an increase in children with diagnosis but the information and understanding of ASD has improved. This could lead the observers having a more open minded and an unset thought process when observing children with ASD in early years education.

Paper 3 - An examination of interactions among children with autism and their typically developing peers.

The paper by Gunn *et al.* (2014) is based on the interactions among the children with autism and their typically developed peers. In this paper the researchers, to determine whether pre-school children with ASD interact differently with their peers, across 3 activities in an early intervention setting. Those being free play, structured group time and semi-structured play. They found that structured environment such as the classroom helped to scaffold and support social engagement for children with ASD. Elias (2025) supports this idea of structured environments benefitting children with ASD by stating that providing predictability and stability in their lives, it can help establish routine and help them to navigate day to day life. This would help promote a sense of comfort and reduces anxiety which is something very prevalent in today's early years classrooms. The Open university (2025) states that Vygotsky concentrated more on children's immediate social and cultural environment and their interactions with adults and peers. He argued that cognitive development occurred first through children's immediate social interactions and then mixed to the individual level as they began to internalise their learning. This thought process suggests that Vygotsky believed that with a stable environment, a child with ASD can have their cognitive development boosted and have their social interactions bettered. This research also found that children with ASD engage more frequently during the structured and semi-structured activities. This could have been impacted by adult's present or learning form a more knowledgeable other. This research took place in America just like the last paper. This is assumed based on the vocabulary used and key words like pre-school which is a school age group in America. A critique of this paper is that, just like the last paper, it took place over a decade ago and may not be an accurate representation anymore. Southern New Hampshire University (2025) suggests that there is a 10-year rule in research relevance, believing that a common guideline is to prioritize sources that are less than ten years old. This is often used as the criteria for the timeliness and relevance of references in scholarly articles.

Understanding how children with ASD experience early years education requires empathy. National Autistic Society (2024) explains that it is important that autistic people's views are being listened to and valued. Primary and secondary research methods was used. Observations and interviews offered a more personalized view of the real classroom experiences, while other studies done only provided a wider, vaguer context. This essay outlines the approach taken to gather data and the reasons behind the choice of participants and methods.

Primary Data Collection.

To capture the everyday experience of children with ASD in the classroom, the primary research was collected using two methods. These two methods were classroom observations and interviews with teachers. These approaches allowed for both a close-up look at behaviours and routines, and an understanding of what's going on behind the scenes from the perspective of the adults who work with these children every day. Reach Out (2024) states that it is important for teachers to know the child's interests and ways of them functioning to give them the opportunity to engage with learning. This is important especially for children with ASD as the teacher can help navigate them to take part and improve them academically, regardless of how big the progression is.

Secondary Data.

A range of sources were examined to understand the common themes and practises on ASD in the classroom. These included difficulties with social interaction, sensory sensitivities, challenges in communication, and misunderstood behaviour. This helped guide the design of the interview questions and observation criteria. For example, the frequent mention of issues with group activities and transitions influenced the decision to observe how children responded during such moments in class. In this way, secondary data didn't just provide information but rather helped shape the direction of the primary research

Observations.

Observations were carried out in the classrooms with the children with ASD. The focus was on how these children interacted with their peers, how they responded to instructions, and how they reacted to the classroom environment. Doing this more than once in each class meant that behaviours could be seen over time, which helped avoid any premade assumptions. It also gave a better understanding of how routines and support strategies worked in the classroom and how the needs of the child were met.

Interviews.

After the observations of the children, interviews were carried out with five teachers who work with 7-year-olds in the primary schools. These teachers were chosen because of their experience with the children with ASD. The interviews were semi-structured, with key questions being asked and room for the teacher to give a bit more information and relate it to their own experience and opinion. Teachers mainly spoke about the rewards and challenges of supporting these pupils. They talked about individual needs, the strategies that helped, and the emotional side of their work. This gave the research a much more personal and caring feel and helped explain some of the behaviours that was recorded during the observations.

The five teachers involved in this research all came from primary schools in the local area. Each one worked with a child diagnosed with ASD who was seven years old, in a year 1 class. This age group was chosen because it's a key stage in development when children are expected to manage more complex social situations and growing academic demand. The sample was selected with a desire to focus on those with direct experience with ASD and how they feel about the chosen topic. The researcher chose participants who could provide deep, thoughtful insight. Being based locally made it easier to do interviews, ensuring that enough time could be spent with each child during observation and each teacher during

interviews. This is a benefit over the other research available as they were either too broad, having been done over many different ages and schools.

The decision to use observations and interviews came from the desire to see the experiences the children have in school first hand. Observations showed what was happening in real-time, while interviews offered the chance to understand the reasons behind those behaviours and the thought processes of the adults supporting them and if they believe that they are doing the most they can to help these children with ASD reach their personal best and help them develop their social skills to help better their relationships with others. This is explained by Major (2013) that state observations is useful for understanding how or why something occurs within a natural setting. Other options, like questionnaires, were considered but didn't seem to offer the same level of depth or personal touch. Focus groups were also avoided, as some teachers may have felt uncomfortable sharing openly in front of colleagues. The chosen methods made it possible to build trust, gather honest responses, and paint a fuller picture of each child's experience. Malaguzzi (2024) explains that a benefit of gaining the trust of a child, stating that being sensitive and responsive helps to strengthen the relationship, leading the child to give more honest and confident answers.

<u>What is Triangulation?</u>

Triangulation was an important part of this research. Triangulation, as explained by Noble *et al.*(2019) *is* a method used to increase the credibility and validity of research findings. It means using more than one source of data to look at the same issue. In this case, findings from observations, interviews, and existing studies were compared to see where they matched. An example of this is a child who appeared withdrawn in group settings during observations was also described by their teacher as struggling with confidence in social situations. This overlap helped confirm that the behaviours seen were a regular occurrence and not a one off. Triangulation added strength to the findings and helps reduce the chance of relying too heavily on one person's opinion or one moment in time, making the final conclusions more balanced and trustworthy and removes any potential bias.

The strengths and weaknesses of the research methods used.

Observations were a strength because they showed real-time behaviours that were observed without any pre-judgements or without relying on their own experiences and opinion. However, some children may have acted differently knowing someone was watching, making it more difficult to know exactly what they were feeling. Interviews were valuable for gathering detailed experiences from the teachers. However, the teachers might have been cautious in what they shared or may have viewed things through their own opinions and personal experiences which added a layer of potential bias. The secondary data helped the research to compare the findings. It did however come from different settings and might not fully reflect what was happening in the specific classrooms that were visited. Regardless, it helped avoid any obstacles in understanding the key reasons.

Ethical Considerations.

When conducting research involving children with ASD, ethical considerations must be prioritised. Children are a vulnerable group, and research involving them must be approached with a big sense of responsibility. This is particularly true when working with children who are verbal but diagnosed with ASD. This is explained by NSPCC (2023) stating that getting consent from children with ASD enables the child to confirm they understand what the research will involve and are happy to take part. This essay explores the key ethical considerations for a study involving this group, focusing on gaining appropriate consent and assent, maintaining confidentiality and data.

Consent and Assent.

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (n.d) explains the difference between consent and assent. Stating that consent is given by a participant who is legally able tom consent, whilst assent is an agreement by an individual not able to give legally valid informed consent when participating. For children, parental consent must be given prior to participation. Parents will be provided with information outlining the aims of the study and the methods being

used. The parents will also be aware of how involved their child will be, and their right to withdraw their child at any point. This helps to ensure that consent is both informed and freely given.

In addition to written parental consent, it is ethically appropriate to seek verbal assent from the children themselves on the day the research takes place. Although children are not legally able to give full consent, their willingness to participate is still important to get. Since the children in question are verbal, assent will be sought to ensure they understand what they are being asked to do and that they feel comfortable with it. Should any child choose not to participate, their decision will be fully respected, even if parental consent has already been granted. This approach reinforces the importance of the emotional state of each child.

The Confidentiality and Anonymity of the participants.

Having respect for the confidentiality and anonymity of participants is not only a moral obligation but also a legal one. Identifiable data like names and specific locations, will be removed in all research materials. Participants will be assigned codes to prevent identification. Vitae (2010) states that maintaining confidentiality safeguards their rights and fosters trust. To protect the confidentiality of the participants their data will be stored securely. Any physical documents will be kept in a private location that is only accessible to the researchers. Digital data will be stored on devices with a password to protect the data. Only those directly involved in the research will have access to the data. When filing and looking through the results, care will be taken to avoid indirect identification.

Minimising Risk to Participants and Researchers.

Minimising potential risks is crucial not only for the wellbeing of participants but also for the protection of the researchers. Children with ASD may have unique needs that must be considered to prevent unnecessary stress or discomfort.
https://ctrinstitute.com/blog/basic-needs-for-people-with-

autism/#:~:text=Although%20this%20can%20sometimes%20feel,and%20a%20sense%20of%20competence. States that the three main needs of children with ASD is safety, acceptance and a sense of competence. Research activities will therefore be designed to be simple and adaptable. Conducting the research in an environment that makes them feel safe and secure, such as a known classroom, will help to reduce anxiety. A responsible adult, such as a teacher or teaching assistant, will be present throughout to offer support if needed. If at any point a participant shows signs of distress the session will be paused, or it will be ended. Training courses such as safeguarding and ASD awareness, will be completed by the researcher to ensure a professional and informed approach, also so the researchers will feel prepared and confident whilst conducting the research. Following the rules of the ethical protocols and maintaining professional conduct throughout will reduce the likelihood of complaints or negative outcomes.

Data Collection.

According to Symantec (2025), handling data ethically requires strict compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. Data collected will be limited to what is necessary for the aims of the study, and participants will be informed about what data is being collected, how it will be used, and for how long it will be stored. With this research however, the parents will be informed as well as the children. After the study is completed and the data has been analysed, all information will be securely destroyed or deleted. Participants and their guardians will also be made aware of their rights. These rights include the right to access and the right to request the deletion of their data at any point before the information is published. Following these procedures ensures that the study remains compliant with legal and ethical expectations.

Emotional and Social Needs of Children with ASD.

Ethical research involving children with ASD requires and demands sensitivity and understanding of each child's individual experiences. Verbal children with ASD may express

themselves differently or require additional support to feel safe and engaged. Therefore, communication will be adapted to suit each participant's level of understanding and comfort. The children will be approached with patience, and the research will be conducted at the child's pace. Visual supports or other communication methods will be made available to help communication. The presence of a familiar adult like the teacher will provide reassurance and allow for smoother interaction during the research process. University of Rochester (2025) explains this as being patient and being respectful and affectionate will help the child with ASD feel comfortable. The children and the parents and teachers will be reminded throughout that they are free to withdraw at any time. This approach empowers them to express their feelings and preferences, which is particularly important for those who may find it difficult to communicate their struggle or feelings of anxiety. Respecting the emotions of children with ASD reflects an ethically grounded approach that values each participant as an individual. This is important as Baron-Cohen (2025) explains that showing them respect will help them feel that their differences are respected and that they are not valued less than neurotypical people.

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