



Introduction.

This presentation will talk about the autism spectrum disorder and look at how it can be identified and how it is diagnosed. This will also include looking at two different barriers that a child with ASD may encounter and how they may impact on them. Finally, it will look at an appropriate support strategy that can be in place to help support the child. Autism spectrum disorder is also known as ASD. This is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, social interactions and behaviour. The symptoms usually begin emerging in early childhood. The exact cause of ASD is still unknown although it is believed to be a combination of genetics and environmental factors (Qui et al, 2024). Autism exists on a spectrum this means that children may experience a wide range of strengths and challenges. These differences can include sensory processing difficulties, language delays and problems with communication and social interactions (Miller et al, 2020). In Wales Autism falls under the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) framework which was first introduced through the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018.

Models of Disability.

Theoretical perspectives.

The medical mode of disability views autism as a condition that requires a formal diagnosis and intervention. In contrast the social model argues that barriers are created by society through lack of understanding, inaccessible environments and limited inclusion (Zaks, 2023). Milton (2012) suggest that communication difficulties arise through mutual misunderstandings between autistic and non autistic individuals rather than a deficit within the child alone.

Identification .

Here are some common early signs:

- **Delayed speech and language development.**
- **Limited eye contact.**
- **Repetitive behaviours/ movements.**
- **Sensory sensitives.**
- **Difficulties with social interactions.**
- **Emotional regulation difficulties.**
- **Lack of response to own name.**
- **(NHS, 2022).**

Early years and healthcare professionals play an important role in recognising these signs in children and initiating referrals. These healthcare professionals include the child's health visitor, speech and language therapist or GP (Domarecki et al, 2025).

Diagnosis Strengths.

The **Integrated autism service (IAS)** and national autism pathways that Wales introduced to help improve the consistency and access to support across Wales Autism assessments are conducted by multidisciplinary teams and follow **NICE guidelines (Welsh Government,2019) (Welsh Government, 2021)**

Diagnosis Criticism.

Despite improvements long waiting lists remain a major concern due to increasing referrals and limited capacity (Holtom et al.2022.) Critics argue that autism diagnosis relies heavily on behavioural observations which can lead to inconsistencies between professionals (Hull et al, 2020). Girls are often underdiagnosed due to masking behaviours and diagnostic criteria historically being based on male presentations of autism. Cultural and socioeconomic factors may also affect access to diagnosis and specialised supports services (Frith, Happe, 2020).

	February 2022	December 2023	Change
Powys Teaching Hb	194	728	275%
Cardiff & Vale UHB	1,267	2,992	136%
Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB	1,187	2,624	121%
Betsi Cadwaladr UHB	2,753	5,163	88%
ALL WALES	9,014	16,812	87%
Hywel Dda UHB	2,194	3,403	55%
Swansea Bay UHB	803	1,099	37%
Aneurin Bevan UHB	616	803	30%

This table shows the increase in autism referrals across Welsh health boards between 2022 and 2023, highlighting the growing pressure on diagnostic services.

Source:
Hardy, 2024

Barriers.

Communication and social interactions.

A key barrier is the communication and social difficulties that autistic people face. Hodges et al, (2020) explains that autistic individuals may experience differences in both verbal and non verbal communication. This can lead to social isolation and misunderstandings within settings. Communication barriers can affect a child's ability to build relationships and participate in play which helps them feel included within the setting (Brede et al, 2017). Lack of awareness of staff and practitioners can result in autistic behaviours being misunderstood as challenging behaviour rather than distress (MacLennan et al, 2022).

Statistics

- **Autism referrals across Wales increased significantly between 2022 and 2023.**
- **Parts of Wales have waiting times of up to two years for neurodevelopmental assessments.**
- **In 2025 the Welsh Government invested £13.7 million into neurodivergence services to improve assessment pathways and reduce delays.**

(Welsh Government, 2019)

(National Health Service, 2024).

Importance of Early Interventions.

- Early identification of autism can help children and their families access specialist and educational adjustments early on.
- Research suggest that early intervention can improve communication skills, emotional regulation and long term educational outcomes.
- Inclusive practice within early years settings help promote participation, confidence and social inclusion (Odom, 2020).

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Sensory Processing.

Many autistic children experience sensory difficulties these can be caused by noise, lightening, textures and busy environments (Baron-Cohen, Robertson,2017). Some children may suffer from a sensory overload which can cause increased anxiety and affect emotional regulation (Ashburner et al, 2019). Sensory overload may increase anxiety and emotional dysregulation especially in busy early years setting (Goodall, 2019). Wearing ear defenders can help cancel out noisy environments for children.

Support strategies

Early intervention and inclusive practice are important in supporting autistic children's communication, emotional regulation and educational outcomes (Odom, 2020). Visual supports such as visual timetables, picture cards and now and next boards can help reduce anxiety, improve understanding and promote independence with the early year's settings (Bateman et al, 2023). Structured routines and adapted learning environments can also support participation, emotional wellbeing and social inclusion for autistic children (National Autistic Society, 2020). Staff should have the appropriate training on using these and should be consistent with their approach and ensure that they are tailored to the individual child (Knight et al 2020)

Here is an example of a now and next board which can be helpful to communicate to the child what is happening.



Source: Amazon (2026)

Here is an example of a visual timetable which can help the child with transitions and anxiety around them.



Source: CloudFront (2020)



Source: TTS

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