

INTRODUCTION

Autism is a lifelong development disability which affects how people interact and communicate with people and the world around them states National Autistic Society (2023a) & Welsh Government (2021a).

Traits of autism include:

- Social and communication difficulties
- Meltdowns and shutdowns
- Narrow interests and obsessions
- Repetitive behavior
- Over or under sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch (NAS,2023a & Baron-Cohen, 2021)

Young people up to the age of 25 including those with autism will have their needs met through the new Additional Learning Needs and Education (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2021a).

1 in a 100 people are on the autism spectrum. (NAS, 2023a, Welsh Gov, 2021a & NICE, 2023).

STRATEGY

SOCIAL STORIES

NAS (2023c) describes how social stories are short descriptions of a particular event, activity and situation to include specific information and can be used to help a child to cope with changes to routine as social stories explain what to expect in that situation and why.

Studies done by Golzari *et al* (2015), Johnson (2015) & Balakrishnan & Aliza (2017) demonstrated that children who received a social story exhibited improved social interaction. Research done by Johnson (2015) also showed decreased anxiety in children.

Balakrishnan & Aliza (2017) recommends parents to use social stories to improve the social skills of their children with autism and suggests a collaborate effort should be made with parents and practitioners ensuring consistency which makes a more successful outcome. With a social story spoken in a literal way the autistic child can perceive previous situations that they might have previously found difficult (NAS, 2023c).

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AUTISM

IDENTIFICATION AND DIAGNOSIS

Baron-Cohen (2017) suggests that autism starts pre-natally and signs should show during the first year of life though stresses that children do not get diagnosed early enough. Welsh Government (2021a) states that for practitioners to be aware of the signs of autism to be able to facilitate referrals for diagnosis, awareness training should be undertaken.

The preschool pathway for children to be referred is via the health visitor, GP and pediatrician. The ALNCO, neuro development team is the pathway for school age children according to Welsh Government (2021a).

Baron-Cohen (2018) stresses that parents need to be advocates for their children too. He developed a questionnaire that health visitors and GPs can use to check children's milestones called the 'QCHAT' (Quantitive checklist for autism in toddlers). Any concerns raised can help them to identify if the child needs a full autism assessment.

Through a multidisciplinary team of practitioners with specialist training, diagnosis is decided through assessments and taken to a 'panel' meeting (Welsh Government 2021a).

It is emphasized that early intervention is important (Baron-Cohen, 2018 & Welsh Government. 2021b). The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales states that the early intervention prevents the possible escalation of their care needs if focused support is not provided (Welsh Government, 2021b). Going on to say that to help a child reach their potential, parents have a vital role in working with the practitioners. However, Smith *et al* (2023) stresses that as all children are unique, a tailored approach to autistic spectrum condition is necessary, looking at their strengths and weaknesses and working on them. Speech and language therapy maybe an option for example

CONCLUSION

Autism is a neurological condition from birth that significantly affects the way a person communicates and socializes, even making friends is difficult. Other conditions co occur with autism including mutism. It is important for early diagnosis and interventions to help support the child to reach their potential in a holistic way as every child with autism is unique with different needs. Using social stories are proven to be a good intervention though the importance of staff training and awareness is a must, including being made aware of the stigma surrounding autism.

SOCIAL BARRIER

There are many barriers in diagnosis. However, I will be looking at stigma and mutism in this poster.

STIGMA

Individuals with autism and their families can experience judgement from others based on behaviors shown especially those who judge not knowing a child has autism (Sarris, 2022).

- Stigma may affect a child's ability to make friends.
- Exclusion, stereotyping and judgement.
- Social disapproval.

These are some of the issues parents say they struggle with according to Sarris (2022).

Studies from the UK and Canada show that immigrant parents from some cultures do not acknowledge that their child has developmental disabilities due to the associated stigma. (Khanlou et al, 2017 & Fox et al, 2017).

Autism Wales (2020) launched a scheme in 2017 through a range of posters, leaflets and videos. The aim was to promote acceptance and understanding in communities to reduce stigma and improve access to facilities.

MUTISM

Welsh Government (2022b) describes mutism as an anxiety condition where children can talk in certain situations but not in others. Selective mutism affects 1 in 140 children according to Welsh Government (2022) & NHS (2023).

The challenge of mutism for practitioners is being able to fully assess children's communication and language skills with confusion on the best approach to support their difficulties (Gilmartin, 2019). Who goes on to say that mutism is on the rise with more girls reported than boys on having a diagnosis of mutism The issue being that children are missing out on developing social skills and making friends, being able to find their voice and taking part in activities (Keville *et al*, 2023).However, professionals have lacked a readiness to diagnose autism and mutism together though they both frequently co-occur together.

Associated difficulties can arise from a child having mutism. For example, a child may be afraid to change their routine in fear of provoking questions and comments (NHS, 2023). SMIRA (2023a) suggests the importance of early diagnosis with parents being provided with support too.

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