

Children with additional support needs: inclusion, advocacy and equity

Section A

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a 'lifelong' neurodevelopmental disability which can significantly impact how people with ASD interact and communicate with the world around them (National Autistic Society, 2021a). Children with ASD often communicate, behave and learn in different ways to other people. NHS inform (2020) explain how 'autism is highly variable' and the word 'spectrum' refers to how autism is experienced differently for each person. Therefore, the needs of children with ASD may vary greatly, with some children needing a lot of help with their daily lives and others needing less (USA Government, 2020).

Early identification of ASD can have a significantly positive impact on the outcomes of the child (Towle, 2013). Autism Alliance (no date) notes how such identification can allow professionals and parents to understand and respond appropriately to needs of the child. However, although ASD is present from birth, it can be difficult to diagnose early as some of the symptoms that children with ASD present may also be visible in children who do not have ASD (Autism Alliance, no date). Furthermore, Health Visitors and General Practitioners (GP) may identify cause for concern and carry out a screening assessment called Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers. However, this does not give the child a diagnosis and therefore, if there were concerns the child would need to be referred for a formal assessment for diagnosis (The National Autistic Society, 2020a).

In addition, early years settings in Wales use the Foundation Phase Compact Profile as a baseline assessment at the start of Reception. This assessment supports the early identification of possible additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2017). Findings and concerns from the assessment can be shared with the school Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNco) and parents. Referrals can be made to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for a formal assessment. However, NHS (no date) notes how waiting time can take up to 24 months. Article 6 of the UNCRC states how children have the right to grow and develop in conditions that do not negatively impact their overall well-being (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2021). Therefore, the earlier the identification, the earlier children with ASD can begin to receive the support they need and have the best

possible chances to develop. This is supported by Welsh Government (2021), as stated in the new The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021 document 'the earlier action is taken, the more effective the action is likely to be'.

However, although there is evidence to prove the positive impact early intervention can have on children with ASD, research suggests that sometimes the 'wait and see' approach has been adopted. This is where, despite recognising a child is showing signs of possible delays in areas such as speech and language, professionals and parents may choose to 'wait and see' if the child naturally progresses through their development stages on their own (Lowry, 2018). National Research Council (2001) argues that the 'wait and see' approach is likely to have a significant negative impact on children with ASD. Koegel et al. (2013) notes how children with ASD often express themselves through behaviours such as aggression and tantrums; these behaviours are described as secondary symptoms. Effective early intervention targeted at addressing primary symptoms can help limit the intensity of the secondary symptoms and therefore, have a more positive impact on the child's well-being. Moreover, delaying early intervention may end up being more time and cost consuming with the child needing more intense and expensive interventions later in life (Cannon et al, 2018; Koegel et al., 2013). It is explained Article 25 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that children with additional learning needs such as ASD have a right to have access to services that meet the specific needs of the child in order to minimise further disabilities (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2021). Therefore, delaying and denying children of early intervention services can be seen as a violation of the child's rights.

Although the waiting time for diagnosis can be long, intervention can be put into place to support the child prior to diagnosis (The National Autistic Society, 2020). Putting intervention into practise as early as possible can improve the child's overall development and therefore improve their quality of life notes Autism Speaks (2009). Furthermore, Autism Spectrum Disorder Foundation (2012) explains how empowering and equipping parents with useful intervention strategies to support their child at home can build stronger child-parent relationships. On the contrary, it is also good practise for early years practitioners to allow parents to share strategies which are working well at home with the setting. This can promote continuity of care (Synergy Home Care, 2020) and build strong, collaborative relationships between settings and parents to

ensure the unique needs of the child are being met (Comer and Haynes, 1997). However, Article 3 of the UNCRC, notes that the best interests of the child should be the primary focus when making decisions about them (UNICEF, 1989). Therefore, when considering the best intervention to put into place to support the child, all adults involved must ensure that it is the intervention most suited to meet the child's individual needs to ensure the best outcomes for the child. This is supported by The National Autistic Society (2017) who explain how it is 'important' to tailor support strategies to suit the individual child as what works for one child with ASD may not work effectively for another child with ASD.

The Welsh Government strives on placing the UNCRC at the core of planning, policy making and practise when it comes to creating a safe and inclusive education for children and young people (Welsh Government, 2019a). The Child Commissioner for Wales (2019) praises the new ALN code for Wales for incorporating the five principles of 'A Children's Rights Approach' within the ALN framework. The ALN procedures intends to focus on developing the skills of education practitioners to endure they deliver the most effective support and provision for children and young people with ALN. Early identification and intervention are an important aspect of the procedures to ensure children are provided with an inclusive and supportive system to ensure the best possible outcomes for children with ALN (ALN Wales, 2019).

Section B

Social interaction is the process which occurs between two or more individuals (Sociology Learners, 2017). Successful social interaction allows for the individual to communicate, express themselves effectively, interpret situations and respond in an appropriate manner (SLT for kids, 2021). As well as verbal communication, nonverbal communication is also used during social interactions. The ability to use and understand nonverbal communication effectively, such as body language and facial expressions can allow for individuals to build 'critical' social skills notes Family Connect (2020). Developing social interaction skills begins in early childhood development and continues through to adulthood. However, social interaction is often a barrier for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). With varying social skills, children with ASD can find it difficult to interpret other people's behaviours and intentions, as well as having difficulty in knowing how to respond and behave appropriately in social situations (The Spectrum, 2021). Children with ASD may become frustrated with the inability to understand social situations and may react with vocal outbursts, inappropriate behaviours (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2020), increased anxiety or social withdrawal and isolation (Bejerot, Eriksson and Mortberg, 2014; Kuusikko-Gauffin et al., 2008). This barrier has differing perspectives within different variations of theoretical models of disability.

There are various theoretical models regarding the understanding of disability, however, the two models mostly discussed and researched are the social model and the medical model of disability (Centre for Resolution, 2020). The medical model of disability proposes that 'illness or disability is the result of a physical condition' (Devon County Council, 2017). In this case, the medical model would see social interactions as a barrier for children with ASD because of their medical condition. In contrast, the social model of disability is a model by which the 'attitudes and structures of society' is what makes an individual disabled (Mental Health Foundation, 2021; Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2021). Therefore, the social model would see the social interactions as a barrier for children with ASD due to societies perceptions and attitudes towards ASD. It has been noted how some organisations believe that 'autism is not a disorder, but a normal variant within the neurological diversity of the human genome' and therefore, barriers faced by individuals with ASD are due to societal

discriminations as opposed to deficiencies (Infogalactic: the planetary knowledge core, 2016).

The medical model perceives children with ASD difficulties to communicate and socially interact as result of their disability. Children with ASD often find it difficult to socially interact with others due to common behaviours such as, rigid language, narrow interests, uneven language development and poor verbal and nonverbal communication skills ((National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2020). This can allow children with ASD to become unable to self-regulate emotions and therefore, respond with challenging behaviour. Furthermore, in situations where children with ASD are exposed to highly stimulating experiences, the child may feel high levels of anxiety and distress which can often result in the child expressing themselves through frustration, panic attacks or in some cases violent outbursts. Furthermore, the negative emotions felt by a child with ASD in these situations can have a negative impact on the child's well-being and can also result in the child becoming disengaged with their learning (Ambitious About Autism, 2021). Although there are many ways in which schools can support children with ASD to overcome social and communication barriers, Massoumeh and Leila (2012) notes how trying to change the child to fit in with their environment rather than adapting the environment to suit the needs of the child can be seen as a strategy influenced by the medical model, where the focus is on the disability rather than the needs of the child.

Furthermore, children with ASD can find it difficult to make and maintain friendships due to their difficulties with social interaction, this can lead to social isolation notes National Autistic Society (2021b). Poor social interaction with peers is considered to be a risk factor of increasing the chances of Children with ASD being exposed to bullying (Hebron, Oldfield and Humphrey, 2016). This is agreed by Maïano et al., (2015) who reports that research have noted that children with ASD are more likely to be victimised at school than their 'typically developing' peers. Therefore, not supporting a child with ASD to overcome social and communication barriers can prevent the child from being fully included in society and in addition, their peers will not have the opportunities to learn how to include them (The Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2021).

In addition, Chown and Beardon (2017) argues that although the social barriers of ASD are considered as an impairment through the context of the medical model, it is society that adds a 'layer of attitudinal and physical barriers that further disable'. Schools have a duty of care to all pupils including those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and aim to offer an inclusive provision. However, Autism Education Trust (2021) report how children with ASD are often vulnerable of being excluded from school. Social interaction and communication barriers may lead to challenging behaviours and these behaviours are sometimes confused with disobedience resulting in the child being excluded from school. This result for the child may be due to the lack of knowledge and understanding of the child's needs. Critchley (2019) notes how numbers of exclusions for children with ASD will continue to rise if school staff are not provided with appropriate training, support and resources. The Alliance for Inclusive Education (2021) explains by not providing children with ALN a fully accessible and inclusive education can have significant implications for the child's opportunities and quality of life.

However, changes within the curriculum and ALN procedures within Wales are focusing more on the positive aspects of the social model. The new changes to ALN legislation in Wales aim to deliver a more inclusive education for children and young people with ALN, where education aims to adapt support and interventions to suit the individual needs of the children with the intention of promoting children's rights (Welsh Government, 2021).

Section C

Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) benefit from additional support in schools. There are many different types of intervention used within early years settings that can support children in overcoming their barriers to learning. However, interventions should be tailored to suit the individual needs of the child (Welsh Government, 2019). Lushan et al. (2020) states that the use of one-to-one (1:1) support within the classroom is amongst the 'best-tested' strategies in supporting children with ASD to overcome their barriers. This type of intervention may support a child with ASD in areas such as, language support, social and communication support, instructional support, behavioural support, physical or medical support (Woodsmall Law Group, 2021). NCC (2018) notes how 1:1 support assistant's can have a positive impact on children with ASD by helping the child access their own learning, understand what is happening around them and adapting learning materials and resources in a way that suits the individual needs of the child.

However, it has been noted how 1:1 support within the class is only one element of a child's education and development and therefore, should not replace the duty of the child's class teacher (Woodsmall Law Group, 2021). This has also been reported by Hazell (2017) who notes how the use of support assistants to support children with ASD can prevent children from getting sufficient interaction with their teachers and peers. Furthermore, Priory Education and Children's Services (2021) explains how there is a lack of understanding and knowledge of ASD within mainstream settings and this can have negative impacts on the child's well-being and education. However, NCC (2018) state how 'the investment in robust training of teaching assistants to deliver structured help and support in the classroom has made for significant improvements' for children with ASD.

Furthermore, a 1:1 support assistant can use strategies such as modelling, prompting and reinforcement to support the child in their daily classroom lives. Modelling can allow for the child to imitate more positive behaviours as demonstrated by the adult (The Spectrum, 2021). Prompting can act as a cue to encourage the child to perform a desired behaviour, this can have a positive impact

on the child by increasing desired behaviours and skill acquisition (Nebraska Autism Spectrum Disorders Networks, 2016). Reinforcement can be used when the child has engaged in desired behaviour as a positive way to encourage the child to repeat the behaviour in future situations (Welsh Government, 2019). Modelling, prompting, and reinforcement are often used simultaneously to encourage positive outcomes for the child.

However, Hazell (2017) highlights how too much support from a 1:1 assistant can the child to become too dependant on their support which can have long term consequences for children with ASD. Although the intention is to support the child to overcome their barriers, developing dependence on the adult can have adverse affects on the child. Bosanquet (2017) agrees with this by stating high levels of dependence on 1:1 support 'can affect their self-esteem, social relationships, and ability to think and act for themselves' and therefore, set a limitation on their progress made at school.

In addition, careful consideration, and planning of effective 1:1 support for a child with ASD can allow children to access their learning and interact successfully. This can reduce the child's feelings of stress and anxiety and holistically benefit the child and in return lead to increased academic progress (Welsh Government, 2019).

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