ECEY6006
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Supporting Children with Additional Learning Needs – ECEY6006.

Script

Reference list; pages 6-7

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is recognised as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that emerges in early childhood and continues to influence development across the lifespan. Current UK data suggests around 1 in 36 children are autistic, which highlights how important early understanding and support are (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Core characteristics typically include differences in social communication, repetitive or patterned behaviours, and distinct sensory processing profiles. These features vary significantly between individuals, reflecting the heterogeneity of the spectrum. This is why no two autistic individuals present the same way, the spectrum is incredibly diverse. Alongside these core characteristics, research shows that autism develops through a combination of genetic influences and early developmental factors, rather than a single identifiable cause (Modabbernia, Velthorst and Reichenberg, 2017). Large scale studies suggest that autism is strongly heritable, yet it is shaped by a complex interaction of genes and environment (Sandin et al., 2017). Neuroimaging research has also highlighted subtle differences in brain connectivity and processing, although these vary widely between individuals, reinforcing the idea that autism presents in many different ways (Hull et al., 2017). Together, these findings highlight that autism is not a single, uniform condition but a diverse developmental profile that shapes how individuals experience and respond to the world around them. Increasing recognition of the neurodiversity perspective has also encouraged a shift away from deficit based views, instead emphasising the strengths, identities and lived experiences of autistic people (Kapp et al., 2013). The neurodiversity movement helps us shift from what's wrong? to what support helps this child thrive. This broader understanding provides an important foundation for exploring how supportive environments, inclusive practice and early intervention can promote positive outcomes across childhood and beyond.

Furthermore, we look at supportive practice for autistic children centres on creating environments that are predictable, personalised and responsive to each learner's strengths, needs and communication style. Predictable routines reduce anxiety and help children feel safe enough to learn. Approaches such as one page profiles help staff understand what matters to the child, including their sensory preferences motivators and the strategies that help them feel safe and regulated. Even small sensory changes, lighting, noise, movement, can make a big difference to regulation. Staff may also use visual supports such as flashcards or lanyard based symbol cards, enabling them to offer consistent communication cues throughout the day and reduce processing demands, particularly during transitions or moments of dysregulation (National Autistic Society, 2022). This aligns with the UNCRC articles 12 and 23 (1989) , which emphasises every child's right to express their views and access education that meets their individual needs. The ALN Code for Wales (2021) reinforces this by requiring schools to use person centred planning, person centred planning works best when families, staff and the child co create strategies. Ensuring

the learner's voice is central, and provide reasonable adjustments and tailored learning approaches so that children with ALN can access learning meaningfully. Inclusive practice means proactively removing barriers and designing learning environments where every child can participate, rather than expecting the child to adapt to settings that do not meet their needs. Tailored approaches may include visual timetables, now and next boards, task chunking, structured routines, flexible pacing, reduced sensory load, and quiet or low arousal spaces to support regulation. The ALNCO plays a crucial role in coordinating this support, leading multi-agency collaboration and ensuring that strategies are implemented consistently across the school. The ALNCO ensures consistency, so the child isn't supported differently in every classroom. Research shows that when environments are adapted rather than expecting the child to adjust, autistic learners experience greater engagement, reduced anxiety and improved wellbeing (Pellicano, Bölte and Stahmer, 2018). Inclusive pedagogy further highlights that responsive teaching and child centred planning promote belonging and positive outcomes for all learners (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Identification, diagnosis and symptoms - Identifying autism in children can be challenging, as early signs often vary widely and may be subtle, especially when a child masks their differences or develops coping strategies. When children mask, this delays identification. Common early indicators include differences in social communication such as reduced eye contact, limited gestures or difficulty interpreting social cues, play as they prefer repetitive or solitary play, and sensory processing, which is heightened or reduced responses to sound, touch or movement. Autism is recognised in the DSM-5 as a neurodevelopmental condition, and clinicians draw on DSM-5 criteria when assessing developmental profiles (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Autism is also recognised as a neurodevelopmental condition within Welsh Government guidance, which outlines expectations for understanding developmental profiles and ensuring appropriate support (Welsh Government, 2021). Despite these signs, many families experience long delays in accessing assessment long waits increase stress for families, with parents often having to advocate persistently for their child to be heard and for concerns to be taken seriously. In Wales, the ALN Code (2021) requires schools to act promptly when additional learning needs are suspected, using observations, person centred discussions and multi-agency collaboration to build a holistic picture of the child. However, diagnostic waiting times can still be lengthy, and families may rely on advocacy services, liaison officers or parent support organisations to navigate the process. Once a diagnosis is confirmed, children may attend mainstream schools with reasonable adjustments and tailored learning approaches, or a specialist centre where this is better suited to their profile and wellbeing. Research highlights that timely identification reduces stress for families, supports early intervention and promotes positive developmental outcomes (Lord et al., 2018). This aligns with the UNCRC articles 23 and 24 (1989), which states that children

have the right to appropriate assessment, support and education that helps them reach their full potential.

Challenges and Barriers - Autistic children can experience a range of challenges and barriers in their daily lives, many of which arise from environments that are not yet fully inclusive or responsive to their needs. Differences in sensory processing can make busy classrooms overwhelming, with noise, lighting or unpredictable routines causing distress or fatigue. A classroom that feels normal to adults can feel physically painful to an autistic child, which highlights the importance of predictable routines, as predictability reduces cognitive load and helps children focus on learning rather than coping. Social expectations can also create barriers, as children may struggle to interpret facial expressions, group dynamics or unspoken rules, leading to misunderstandings or feelings of isolation. Inclusive practice aims to remove these barriers by creating environments where every child can participate meaningfully, using approaches that value strengths, reduce stigma and ensure that support is embedded rather than added on. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) highlights how learning is shaped by interaction, yet autistic children may not always receive the scaffolded support needed to engage fully. This connects closely with Bowlby's attachment theory, as consistent and attuned 1:1 support can provide a secure base that helps children feel safe, regulated and ready to learn. Predictable, trusting relationships with key adults reduce anxiety and support emotional wellbeing (Bowlby, J. 1969). Within education, barriers may include limited staff training, inconsistent understanding of neurodiversity or teaching approaches that do not reflect children's strengths. Staff training is therefore essential, as many barriers arise from the environment rather than the child when staff understand sensory needs, communication differences and regulation, they can prevent challenges before they occur (Welsh Government 2021). The Equality Act (2010) requires schools to remove these barriers through reasonable adjustments, but implementation can vary. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) helps explain how challenges can accumulate across home, school and community systems, affecting wellbeing and participation. Some children may also face stigma or low expectations, which can impact confidence and self-esteem. With the right support, such as predictable routines, sensory friendly environments, visual supports and responsive teaching, autistic children can thrive in mainstream settings or, where appropriate, in specialist provision that better meets their profile and learning style.

Strengths and Unique Abilities - Autistic individuals bring a wide range of unique abilities and strengths that contribute positively to learning environments and communities. A neurodiversity informed perspective recognises that many autistic people demonstrate exceptional attention to detail, deep focus, strong memory, creativity, and innovative problem solving. Kapp et al. (2013) emphasise that these strengths are central to understanding autism as a form of human diversity rather than a deficit. Similarly, the National Autistic Society (2022) highlights that autistic individuals often excel in pattern recognition, reliability, and specialist interests, which

can become powerful assets when supported effectively. Many autistic learners thrive when tasks tap into their interests or allow for deep, sustained focus, and what may appear as fixation is often a powerful capacity for concentration and expertise. These strengths also extend beyond the classroom, with autistic individuals frequently recognised for honesty, reliability and innovative thinking within their communities (National Autistic Society, 2022). This strengths based view aligns with the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021), which encourages practitioners to identify and nurture each learner's capabilities to promote meaningful participation and wellbeing. Inclusive pedagogy reinforces this by emphasising that learning environments should be designed to build upon these strengths rather than suppress them, ensuring that autistic learners can participate meaningfully and confidently (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Conclusion - Autism is a diverse and lifelong neurodevelopmental difference and understanding it requires looking beyond challenges to recognise the whole person. Early identification, awareness of sensory and communication differences, and supportive, inclusive practice all play a vital role in promoting wellbeing and participation. While some autistic individuals experience barriers in education and daily life, many also demonstrate unique strengths, interests and abilities that enrich their communities. Approaches informed by neurodiversity emphasise that every autistic person is unique, with their own profile of needs and talents (Kapp et al., 2013). By adopting a strength based, person centred approach, practitioners can create environments where all learners feel valued, understood and able to thrive. This aligns with inclusive pedagogy, which emphasises that meaningful participation is achieved when environments adapt to the learner, not when the learner is expected to fit into inflexible systems (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). By recognising individuality, promoting belonging and responding to each child's strengths, practitioners can support autistic learners to flourish across education and wider life.

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