

Good evening, my name is Tiegan Dickeson student number 2107308 and today I will be discussing Autism Spectrum Disorder, also known as ASD, in early years education. My presentation will focus on what Autism Spectrum Disorder is, autism in early years settings, the barriers autistic children may face and how practitioners can support children with autism in classrooms.

Firstly, what is Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD in the early years? NHS (2022) states that autism spectrum disorder, or ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects how a child would interact, communicate, learn and it would affect their behaviour. Moreover, Neurodivergence Wales(no date), also suggests that by the ages of two to three, symptoms such as delayed speech, restricted eye contact, repetitive play would often be noticed. Since its features vary greatly, it is called a spectrum disorder and that would require specific support early on.

Autism is described as a spectrum because every child experiences autism differently. Some children may have strong verbal skills but struggle socially, while others may communicate non-verbally and rely on different visual supports or gestures. This means that early identification is important because it allows practitioners and families to provide support that can positively impact communication, emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes. Parents and carers are often the first to notice developmental differences, therefore partnership working between home and educational settings is essential.

Moving on to autism in early years settings. According to the National Autistic Society (2023), social communication and routine changes can be difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD, which may have an impact on their involvement in nursery activities. For example, a four-year-old with autism might frequently play alone, avoid making eye contact and get upset when switching between activities. These behaviours might point to a further need for learning and prompt practitioners to start making observations and assessments early. Early detection of SEND is crucial because it enables the implementation of treatments and support, according to the Department for Education (2015).

This is important as children learn through social interaction and support from others, according to Vygotsky (1978). According to this view, children with autism may need more adult supervision and assistance to support them in taking advantage of educational opportunities and this would be used by adults helping by scaffolding and trying to support the child's social interactions.

Piaget (1952), similarly believes that children learn by active exploration, however children with autism may encounter obstacles that prevent them from fully participating without accommodations to support their needs.

Mackenzie, Cologon and Fenech (2016) contend that rather than trying to change the child, inclusive practice should focus on reducing barriers in the environment. This relates to the social model of disability, which holds that problems result from circumstances that are not tailored to each person's needs. Examples of inclusive practice may include visual timetables, quieter learning spaces, sensory-friendly activities and predictable daily routines to help all children feel secure and included. Within early years settings, practitioners may also observe behaviours such as repetitive play, lining up toys or distress during transitions between activities. Positive relationships with adults are important because they help children with Autism feel safe, supported and confident within the learning environment.

Barriers and how we can support this

Next, I will discuss barriers. In early childhood settings, autistic children may encounter social, communicative and sensory obstacles that affect their learning and growth. A child may experience frustration and mental distress if they are unable to communicate their needs or understand instructions due to communication issues. According to the National Autistic Society (2023), children with autism frequently have communication and interactional (interact) difficulties that could affect their ability to participate in group activities.

Furthermore, in nursery settings, sensory barriers are common. Children with autism may become overwhelmed by loud noises, bright lights and crowded busy classrooms, which can lead to anxiety or withdrawal from activities. A child may find it difficult to participate in educational activities if they feel upset during carpet time because of the noise levels. Sensory sensitivities may also include difficulties with textures, smells, touch or certain clothing materials, such as wet clothes which may impact a child's comfort and concentration throughout the day.

According to MacLeod and Perepa (2020) there are many different early childhood educators that had minimal confidence in detecting early indicators of autism, which can delay intervention and limit the efficacy of supported interventions. Furthermore, insufficient training and a lack of resources might create systemic barriers that prevent the educator's participation to support the children and families who have ASD.

Furthermore, social difficulties may also limit children with autism's capacity to form friendships. Difficulties in recognising social cues and ways to communicate might lead

to isolation from others. According to Nutbrown and Clough (2014), inclusive early childhood education is critical for providing equitable opportunity and positive social experiences for children with additional learning needs. These impediments can have an impact on the child's emotional wellbeing, confidence and academic success. Autistic children who may not receive adequate support may feel anxiety, exclusion and have decreased involvement in learning activities. These barriers may also affect long-term development if children are unable to access appropriate support. The Equality Act (2010) states that educational settings have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to ensure all children can participate fully within education. Finally, I will discuss how to support children with autism in classrooms. Autism Education Trust, with no date provided, states that children with autism frequently encounter substantial educational challenges. These can be addressed by ensuring that supportive educational settings are structured, consistent and accepting of all differences. Autistic children deserve a setting that is saturated with high-quality and inclusive education. Practitioners must be aware of the three major areas of difference in autism and how they affect how autistic children learn and interact in educational environments. Understanding autistic children requires knowledge about autism and its differences. Staff must take into account differences such as social communication and understanding, sensory processing and integration, as all children with autism have different needs.

Furthermore, according to the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) Code of Practice, or Department for Education (2015), the child and class teachers or early years practitioners have an obligation to guide students in early detection of students who may be suffering, particularly those who are limiting their academic growth. When challenges are discovered, they should be discussed with the child's family and the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator, or SENCo or now known as a ALNCo, to determine the best course of action, which may include formal evaluation and referral if necessary. We can also support families by directing them to early help hub, which can support families in appropriate training courses and support families to their individual needs to fully support their child.

While many screening and assessment approaches may be effective for an assessment based on the child's needs and identification, mainstream educators who do not have specialised training should use them with care. To further support children with autism, visual supports and organised routines are an effective support method for children with autism in early education settings. According to the Autism Education Trust (2020), visual timetables, image cards and consistent routines can help young children with autism to minimise anxiety and communicate more effectively. Practitioners may also use now-and-next boards, labelled areas and visual instructions to support understanding and independence.

Practitioners should adapt communication by using simple language, short instructions and giving children extra time to process information. Positive reinforcement and praise can also encourage participation, confidence and emotional security. Sensory support strategies such as calm corners, sensory breaks, ear defenders and fidget resources may also help children regulate their emotions and remain engaged in learning.

Sensory circuits are a type of sensory integration intervention. This should be done first thing at school and after lunchtime. It consists of a series of physical activities intended to alert, organise and calm the child. The sensory circuit tries to improve sensory processing by assisting children in regulating and organising their senses in order to achieve the correct degree of attention required for effective learning. The circuit should be an engaging, physical and enjoyable activity for children.

The UNCRC highlights every child's right to education, participation and inclusion regardless of disability or additional learning needs. This links to legislation such as the Equality Act (2010) and the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) Code of Practice (DfE, 2015), which require educational settings to provide reasonable adjustments and inclusive support for all children.

Partnership working is also essential. Practitioners should work closely with families, ALNCo and outside professionals such as speech and language therapists or educational psychologists to ensure support strategies remain consistent and centred around the child's individual needs. Although another barrier to supporting children with Additional Learning Needs such as autism would be that some parents or carers could be concerned that their child will be diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. Families may delay assessments, referrals or acceptance of support in educational settings out of fear of stigma, prejudice or unfavourable opinions about autism. Despite evidence demonstrating that early identification can help improve outcomes for behaviour, communication and their child's emotional wellbeing, this may still have an impact on early intervention. The National Autistic Society (2023) states that misconceptions about autism and anxieties about how their child could be treated by others cause anxiety in some families when their child receives a diagnosis. In order to guarantee that children receive the right care as soon as possible, practitioners must establish trusted connections with families, offer comfort and work collaboratively. (National Autistic Society, 2023; Department for Education, 2015).

Autism Spectrum Disorder affects children in different ways and can impact communication, social interaction, behaviour and participation within early years settings. However, through early identification, inclusive practice and supportive learning environments, autistic children can successfully access learning opportunities and

develop positive relationships. It is important that practitioners reduce barriers within the environment and create settings that value and support all children equally.

Inclusive practice and children's rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that every child has the right to education, inclusion and participation. This would further link to the Equality Act (2010), which requires educational settings to make reasonable adjustments for children with disabilities or any additional learning needs and to ensure inclusive practice ensures autistic children feel valued, respected and included within educational environments.

Montessori believed children benefit from independence, structured environments and sensory learning experiences. This supports autistic children because routines, practical activities and calm learning spaces can improve engagement and confidence.

Has anybody got any questions?

Question- answers:

1. **How can practitioners make an early years environment more inclusive for autistic children?**

Visual time tables, structured routines, communication boards, neutral tone classrooms to prevent children becoming overwhelmed.

Has anybody else got any more questions? Thank-you listening.

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