

Supporting Children with High Functioning Autism in the Early Years

Introduction

High functioning autism in children is the term used for a child who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) without an intellectual disability (Thomeer *et al*, 2017). ASD holds a medical status and is classified as a developmental or neurological disorder (Litherland and Chown, 2015).

Identifying and Diagnosing Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterised by challenges in communication and social interaction, as well as distinctive patterns of behaviour (World Health Organization, 2023). These behaviours often include: repetitive movements, needing routines, and sensory processing difficulties, which can cause distress in response to certain noises or smells. Children with ASD may also struggle to express and regulate their emotions and often find social interactions particularly challenging (NHS, 2022).

The NICE guidelines advise practitioners to refer children for an autism assessment if they observe signs of autism within their setting. Practitioners are also encouraged to include parents' observations from the home environment in their referral. However, the guidelines acknowledge that parents may not always recognise these signs as indicative of ASD; therefore, a referral should still be made if the practitioner suspects autism (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2017). Autism assessments involve detailed questions about the concerns raised by both parents and practitioners, including challenges the child faces at home, in school, and in social settings. The process also incorporates information from other professionals regarding the child's developmental and medical history, alongside an observational assessment conducted by a medical professional (Welsh Government, 2021).

Barriers to Learning and Development

Children with high-functioning autism often hide their autistic traits as a coping strategy in social environments such as school, which is referred to as 'masking' (Cremonese et al., 2023). While masking can help children with ASD navigate social situations and appear to "fit in" with their peers, it can have an impact on their mental health. Children who mask their autistic traits frequently adjust their actions and personalities to meet the expectations of others. This may involve suppressing their own needs, such as refraining from stimming or hiding their reactions to sensory sensitivities. They may also overthink social interactions and rehearse scripted responses in advance (National Autistic Society, 2025a).

Masking can have significant consequences for a child's mental and physical health. Research shows that the effort involved in masking is often exhausting and can lead to heightened stress and anxiety (Ross, Grove, & McAloon, 2023). High levels of anxiety in children with ASD may manifest through distressed behaviours such as emotional overwhelm, meltdowns, aggression towards themselves or others, burnout, or more serious mental health conditions like depression (National Autistic Society, 2025b). Children experiencing anxiety or depression may struggle to concentrate and focus on tasks, which can negatively affect their ability to learn and may also lead to disruptive behaviour (Kratt, 2016). When children are in an anxious state, their fight, flight, or freeze response may interpret school as a threat, leading to school avoidance. This suggests that avoiding school can be a neurological stress response rather than a conscious choice made by the child (Halligan & Cryer, 2022).

Strategies to support children with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder

Mental health professionals can support children by developing tailored therapy plans that meet the individual needs of the child and their family. These plans may include child-focused therapy sessions or cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) interventions designed to address anxiety and depression (CDC, 2025).

Early Years settings can provide practitioners with training through the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) Project. This initiative, led by Educational Psychologists, equips practitioners with the skills needed to offer targeted emotional literacy support to children struggling with emotional regulation (Early Years Learning Surrey, 2025). Once trained, the designated ELSA is responsible for identifying the individual emotional needs of the children they support. These needs are prioritised into targeted goals for the child's personalised plan. During sessions, the ELSA focuses on helping the child develop coping strategies and learn emotional and social skills that will support their overall well-being (ELSA Network, 2017).

Conclusion

High Functioning Autistic Spectrum Disorder affects many children within the early years. Although the signs of the condition are often missed in the early years due to children with the condition being hyper-vigilant to their social differences and therefore mask their behaviours. This can result in severe anxiety or depression resulting in their well-being and development being impacted. Practitioner training on recognising these signs and early social emotional interventions being put in place have been shown, through studies to have a positive impact on children's mental health with ASD.