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A practitioner's guide for learning support assistants in fostering inclusion for learners with ASD within primary schools.

This practitioners guide provides a detailed and informative guide for learning support assistants in fostering inclusion and working with learners with Additional Learning Needs within primary schools.

Introduction

ALN or Additional Learning Needs can be defined in many ways and terms. A person has additional learning needs if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for additional learning provision, also known as ALP (Welsh Government, 2020). Additionally, a child of compulsory school age or person over that age has a learning difficulty or disability if they, have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or has a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 which prevents or hinders learners from making use of facilities for education or training of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream maintained schools or mainstream institutions in the further education sector (Welsh Government, 2020). The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 provides a framework for all educational settings and practitioners in supporting children and young people with Additional Learning Needs in Wales (Welsh Government, 2018).

Inclusion also comes under the term of ALN, this refers to an environment where everyone feels respected, valued and has equal opportunities. Inclusion also refers to schools, early years settings and other educational settings and practitioners developing their policies, cultures and practices to include children with Additional Learning Needs (Welsh Government, 2016). Continually, the Equality Act 2010

supports inclusion within the education sector. Which further protects children with additional learning needs from discrimination, harassment and victimisation (GOV.UK, 2015).

Strategies for inclusive education

- Adopt inclusive language
- Encourage peer interaction
- Create a safe and supportive environment
- Diverse group activities
- Collaborative teaching
- Know your learners

Background on ASD

What is autism spectrum disorder?

‘Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them’.

(National Autistic Society, 2011)

Autism spectrum disorder also known as ASD, is a neurodevelopmental condition. Neurodevelopmental conditions are a collective of cognitive and behavioural disorders that affect the functioning of the brain (Welsh Parliament, 2024). Additionally, disorders such as ASD can affect and impact things including language skills, learning ability, social behaviour and motor skills. As well as this, some common neurodevelopmental conditions can include:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyscalculia
- Dyspraxia or developmental coordination disorder (DCD)
- Tourette syndrome and other tic disorders

(Welsh Parliament, 2024)

Characteristics you may find in children with ASD:

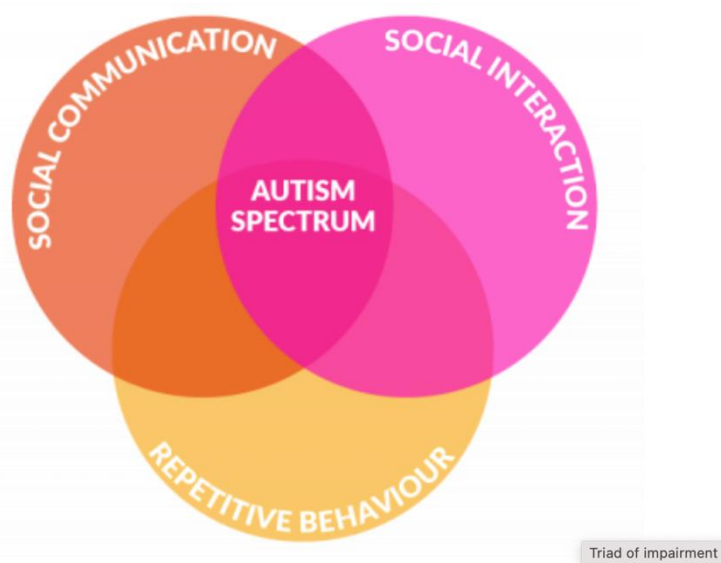
- Verbal and non-verbal communication
- Repeated and unusual behaviours, interests and routines
- Responses to sensations
- Different ways of learning, moving or paying attention
- Over or under sensitivity to light, sound, taste and touch
- Social interaction challenges
- Highly focused interests and hobbies

(National Autistic Society, 2024)

In Wales, the Welsh Government is developing the Statutory Code of Practice on the Delivery of Autism Services (Welsh Government, 2021). This code proposes what autistic people, their families and carers can expect from public services in Wales and how the code adapts their approach in being more aware and more attune to neurodiversity (Welsh Government, 2021). Despite this, the National Autistic Society argued that the Welsh Government could improve this code further and provided a document for improvements (National Autistic Society, 2024). This code is also in alignment with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), and the Equality Act (2010). In England, the Autism Act (2009) provides guidance on meeting the needs of people with autism spectrum disorder and how they can be supported. However, there are some criticisms towards this act. Although the act is in place to support and guide ASD, the act only applies to adults and not children and young people (GOV.UK, 2022).

Triad of Impairments (Wing and Gould, 1978)

The Triad of Impairments model describes the main features all children with autism have some difficulty with. Children with ASD have significant difficulties relating to other people, it is very common for ASD children to have profound sensory issues. This, combined with the triad of impairments, means that children with autism experience the world very differently (Neurodivergence Wales, 2020).



Autism 360 (no date) *Triad of Impairments diagram.*

Social communication often involves children having difficulty with processing and understanding verbal information. This may also involve difficulty with understanding social language and body language. In addition to this, children and adults may also struggle with paralinguistic features such as tone of voice, intonation and stress (Psychology Network, 2018).

Social Interaction involves children with autism behaving as if others do exist and treating people as objects. Continually, it also involves children and adults being unresponsive to other people's voices and their attempts at communication. This section also covers children and adults may find making friends and building relationships difficult. They may also struggle to manage unstructured parts of the day (Psychology Network, 2018).

Social imagination involves children obsessively following a routine and rituals. They also like their day-to-day life to be structured. Additionally, children and adults may have a poor awareness of danger around them, thinking forward and what will happen next. They may also have lack of empathy towards others. Finally, children and adults may have an impaired imaginative play especially when interacting with others (Psychology Network, 2018).

Adapting Day to Day Practice within the Classroom

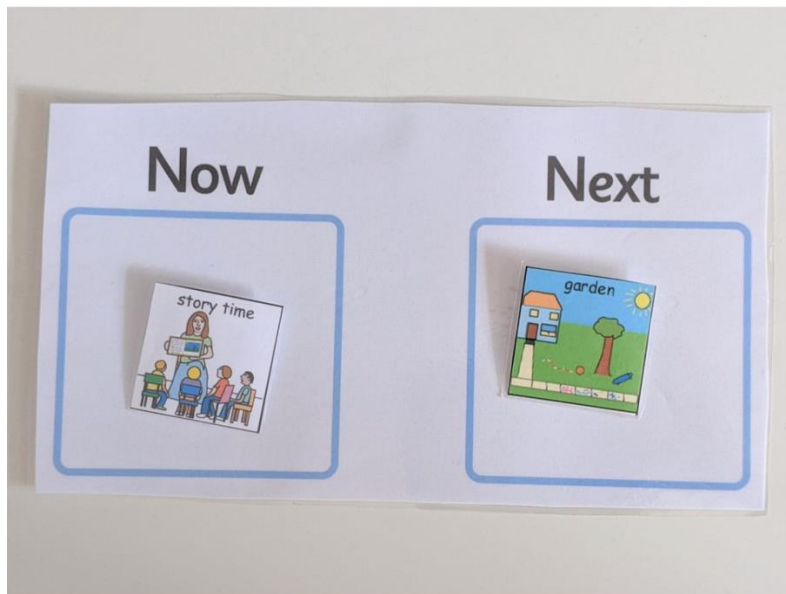
It is essential that each child is considered as an individual, and that teaching practice and the school environment are tailored to meet their individual needs.

The School Environment –

The impact of the environment on sensory distress needs to be considered across the school. The classroom environment is often a distraction or distress for pupils with autism. Things such as bright lights, buzzing noises from classroom equipment, visual displays or the movements of many children through an area can be triggering and challenging for a child with ASD (Neurodivergence Wales, 2020). By adapting the classroom, or making changes for children with ASD, the child will feel less anxious, will less likely become overstimulated and will be more likely to behave in an environment they're comfortable in. For example, background noise can be very disturbing and distracting for a child with ASD, this can be from chatter from other pupils or noise from equipment that you would not notice yourself. In this case, ear defenders would be a great way to decrease background noise, whilst enabling the pupil to focus on your interactions (Neurodivergence Wales, 2020).

The school day –

Children with ASD need support to understand the structure of their school day, and this is even more important when there are changes to the usual day including concert practices, school trips or special assemblies. A great way to combat this is using 'now and next' picture timetables. Which consist of the timetables being laid out in a vertical line, with the next activity always appearing at the top. When this activity ends the picture should be removed from the planner so the child can clearly see what activity is next and what is to follow afterwards (Neurodivergence Wales, 2020).



Now and Next Board

The Autism Page (2020) *Now and Next picture timetable*.

Whole school activities –

Many children with autism may struggle with certain points of the school day, such as lunch time, assemblies and play time. Adaptations will need to be made to decrease stress and anxiety levels. For example, assemblies can be challenging for many reasons such as movement of large groups, different children and adults, not understanding expectations. If a child finds a particular section of the assembly hard, they should be encouraged to attend for the sections they find less distressing. For similar reasons, lunch time can also be very challenging for a child with ASD. The child should be able to attend for lunch earlier than other pupils or when they have left, when it is quieter. If the child has sensory issues around food, special dietary requirements can be made with school catering (Neurodivergence Wales, 2020).

Case study 1 –

Child's name: CD

Age: 5

Main areas of concern: does not stay in seat, very rough with classmates, cannot complete work, occasionally hits and bites staff and refuses to sit for circle time.

Outline of case study –

CD is currently in a mainstream primary school. The incidents of physical harm to his teacher and teaching assistants would primarily happen when his teacher or teaching assistant sat beside him to assist him with work, yet at other times he would seek comfort from staff members. The teacher also noted that CD could not complete work due to not being able to stay seated for more than 1-2 minutes. Circle time had become increasingly challenging for teachers and teaching assistants as CD repeatedly pushed classmates who were sat near him and on occasion had pulled their hair and bitten them. Arrival at school had become more challenging for

CD as they would run down the corridor crashing into others. Continually, when leaving the classroom and forming a line, CD would refuse to stay in line and push other pupils out of line. Reports from school and educational psychologist indicated that CD had great expressive language with a broad vocabulary (Centre for Autism, 2024). The parents had stated they were finding difficulty in controlling and managing behaviours at home and required some strategies to support them. They found that CD was hitting, biting and kicking them on a daily basis. They noticed that CD was calmer and quieter on the days they took him to the park and when they engaged in rough, and tumble play at home (Centre for Autism, 2024).

Assessment and analysis

A Sensory Profile (Dunn, 1999) was completed, and observations were carried out at home and school with information collated over a two week time frame. This analysis was integrated with the assessment results from the teacher, speech and language therapist and behaviour intervention specialist (Centre for Autism, 2024).

CD shows sensory seeking with some sensory over-responsiveness.

Sensory seeking

CD requires movement and therefore finds it difficult to work for long periods of time and stay in his seat or sit still for circle time. CD requires movement to keep his brain active and alert, so when they need movement CD will quickly leave his seat. When CD engages in physical activity, for example playing in the park, he appears calmer and more occupied as his sensory needs have been met (Centre for Autism, 2024). CD also seeks proprioceptive, his enjoyment of rough and tumble play demonstrates his need for intensive input to his muscles. This explains why CD likes tight hugs from his teachers and teaching assistants, as they provide deep pressure input. However, CD does not understand that not everyone requires this input, and his way of playing is hurting others. As his social understanding is limited, he is unable to read other children and see that his behaviour is upsetting and unsettling towards them (Centre for Autism, 2024).

Sensory over responsiveness

CD's physical harm towards his peers, staff members and parents are due to over responsiveness. His breakouts happen when others stand or sit too close to him during circle time, when staff assist him with work and when standing in ques or forming a line (Centre for Autism, 2024). The close physical proximity of others causes CD to become intolerable towards light touch from others. CD engages in aggressive behaviour due to his sensory processing difficulties. Thus meaning, unharmed touch from others is viewed as painful and therefore creates breakouts such as biting, kicking and hitting as a way of moving peers who get too close to him. CD can tolerate rough and tumble and hugs as they provide predictable input and deep pressure rather than unpredictable touch (Centre for Autism, 2024). Circle time is also a challenging time for CD as his receptive language skills are limited, and he may not fully understand and engage in discussions. Despite this, CD shows great expressive language on his favourable topics.

Intervention strategies

There are many intervention strategies which were used to help and benefit CD and provide support and guidance for teaching assistants within the classroom environment:

1. Movin' Sit Cushion

A movin' sit cushion is a wedge shaped cushion lightly inflated with air. These tactile wedge cushions help improve posture, provide sensory feedback and calm fidgeters, helping children with ASD to remain focused for longer. The cushion was provided for CD at times when he was required to sit and complete pieces of work. The cushion also provided movement input, which meets his sensory needs without having to get up and leave his seat. The wedge also gives additional proprioceptive input as it pushes him forward on to his legs, further increasing load on muscles and joints (Centre for Autism, 2024).



Example of Movin' Sit Cushion

2. Chair Bands

Chair bands are a resistive material which activates muscles and joints. This type of input can be relaxing, calming and regulating for children with autism spectrum disorder. CD would have a chair band attached to the front legs of his chair so that when he required movement, he would kick his feet against the band and receive that proprioceptive input he required (Centre for Autism, 2024). This resistive material also allows for CD to focus longer with tasks and encourages him to sit in his seat for longer.

3. Mat at circle time

CD received a small mat to sit on during circle time which was positioned next to the teacher. CD's classmates were informed that they could not sit on the mat nor near the mat. This has reduced CD's anxiety and fear that other children may come near him and has enabled him to stay and be involved within circle time for longer amounts of time (Centre for Autism, 2024).

4. Sensory diet

A programme of movement activities has been gradually introduced to CD's routine. This consists of ten minute engagement sessions in the morning, mid-morning and again in the afternoon. These activities provide CD with the proprioceptive and movement he requires and needs, which then help him sit in his chair for longer and therefore keep him engaged with activities. This programme of movement activities drastically reduced CD's behaviours in play time as his sensory needs were being met during other activities (Centre for Autism, 2024). The range of activities which were offered to CD, were presented to him on his visual timetable so they were easily accessible to choose from. The variety of activities include:

- Star jumps
- Crawling through a tunnel
- Bouncing on a space hopper
- Lying on his tummy over an exercise ball to complete activities, for example, throwing beanbags at a target or finishing a jigsaw
- Hopscotch
- Running on the spot or short distances outdoors
- Propelling a scooter board

As well as this, during the movement break, the teaching assistant observing CD should notice when he becomes disengaged from the specific activity and advise him to do ten stretches before engaging in work again. When CD is older, he will be able to independently ask for a movement break when he feels attention span breaking down (Centre of Autism, 2024).

An example of what a sensory diet may look like within a primary school:

Mia's sensory diet might look like this

Breakfast – Mia drinks her milkshake through a straw and she always has chewy bread, her mother alternates between bagels and sourdough.

Getting dressed – Mia's mum usually does a foot and hand massage when she gets dressed. If there is time they will also do a big squash where she lies between her beanbags. This provides **touch pressure** which supports calming.

Arrival at school – When Mia arrives at school she has ten minutes to sit and watch the fish tank or do a puzzle or read a book in a quiet corner.

At 10, 12 and 2pm – Mia completes her resistance band activities with her teaching assistant.

Arriving at home – Mia has 10-20 minutes to chill out with her soft toys in the space her parents made under her bunk beds. This space is dark and quiet. Or, she does a 10-20 minute yoga video.

Before bed – Mia's parents give her another beanbag squash and massage before she goes to sleep.

(Griffin Occupational Therapy, 2020)

5. Visual strategies

As well as the sensory strategies described above, visual strategies have also been embedded within CD's routine to adapt communication and to investigate some of the behavioural concerns. Although CD showed levels of expressive language, these would often be limited to topics of his choice, for example, Dr Who. The assessment conducted showed CD's difficulties with receptive language. Thus meaning, tasks presented verbally to CD were not understood in the classroom. This would explain the behaviours during circle time as CD would become overwhelmed with the levels of verbal noise within the classroom and used the behaviours to escape from circle time (Centre of Autism, 2024).

The main visual strategies:

- **Visual Schedule** – this allows CD to recognise when it is time for work and when he will have a movement break. This allows CD to become more relaxed and has shown a positive effect on his behaviour.
- **Visual timer** – this allows CD to know how long he must work for and engage with his activities. This also works for circle time.
- **'Whose turn' card** – this is shown in circle when it is CD's turn to speak, this allows for others not to be interrupted.
- **Structured tasks** – this provides a visual structure for CD which supplies clear instructions and shows when a task is completed. This allowed for greater concentration from CD.

Implications to intervention strategies

Despite using these great intervention strategies, some possible implications could occur. As this is a tailored strategic plan for an individual child, they may not meet the needs of another child as each child is different. Visual aids are a great way for children with ASD to learn. However, too many visuals can be very distracting and cause children with ASD to become over stimulated. Sensory diets may have some restrictions, a child with ASD may need support from 9am however their sensory diet does not have a slot until 10am. On the other hand, a child may be working well and may not require a strategy at the given time of the sensory diet (Griffin Occupational Therapy, 2020).

Effective inclusive classroom strategies for teaching assistants

An inclusive classroom should consist of children learning together with and without learning differences. For children with autism, inclusion can provide improved social skills and enhance social interactions. This links with Vygotsky's (1962) theory of children learning best through social interaction (McLeod, 2024). Continually, ASD children being part of a diverse classroom allows them to learn suitable communication techniques and social behaviours through interaction and observation (The Incredible Years, 2024). Non-autistic children also benefit from engaging and learning alongside children with ASD. It allows non-autistic children to develop understanding, empathy, acceptance of differences, which supports them for the diverse world outside of their education (The Incredible Years, 2024).

Classroom strategies which incorporate effective inclusion -

1. Sensory-Friendly spaces and tools

Creating sensory spaces, rooms and tools, such as fidget toys, weighted blankets and noise-cancelling headphones, provide children with ASD to focus on promoting touch, maintaining focus and concentration and to manage sensory overload. As mentioned previously, rotating flexible seating and movement breaks can also benefit sensory needs (The Incredible Years, 2024).

An example of what a sensory room could look like (Bell, 2016)



Froebel (1837) believed that play was the highest expression of human development in childhood, regardless of cognitive, physical or emotional differences (Bell, 2016).

2. Reward systems to promote positive behaviours

Promoting on task behaviour using ‘first/then’ –

This promotes a child to complete an unfavourable task paired with something they enjoy doing. For example, if circle time is a challenge, schedule it right before playtime or snack time. Therefore, when it is time for circle time, it can be presented as “first circle time, then playtime” (National Autism Resources, 2024).

First, then, next chart –

As explained above, this strategy is an extended version. This entails asking your pupil to complete two tasks before their preferred activities. For example, “first literacy sheet, next maths sheet, then playtime” (National Autism Resources, 2024).

Token board –

A token board is a way of providing rewards by encouraging positive behaviour and decreasing negative behaviour. When using this technique, the pupil will gain a token once completing a specific task and in return, the pupil will hand in however many tokens gained and return them for a toy or privilege they desire (National Autism Resources, 2024). This is a great strategy to use rather than discipline or ‘taking away’ one of their desired rewards. This strategy allows children with ASD to be encouraged to engage in different activities, in which the token board keeps them motivated (National Autism Resources, 2024).

3. Teach calming exercises

There are many exercises which can help children with ASD to relax and destress. Two simple exercises include deep breathing and isometric exercises. When a child becomes overwhelmed, their breathing becomes faster and their heart rate increases. Deep breathing is a great way to combat this, it is a simple stress

management tool that a child can use to calm themselves down (National Autism Resources, 2024).

Tension can also be released from your muscles by doing some isometric exercises. These can include:

- Pushing hands together
- Shrug your shoulders
- Pushing knees together
- Making a fist and squeezing

For a child who may struggle to understand isometric exercises, they can be given a stress ball which makes it easier for them to complete these activities.

4. 'About me' information sheets

This allows for teachers and teaching assistants to get to know relevant facts about each individual child within their class. The sheets provide information on likes, dislikes, needs and fears (Autism Speaks, 2024).

5. Use concrete, simple language

Children with ASD may struggle with abstract language. Clear and straight instructions will help all children follow instructions and directions. Breaking down tasks and instructions into simple language gives children the chance to stay engaged and focus in the task at hand (The incredible Years, 2024).