



WHAT IS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER?

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) IS A NEURODEVELOPMENTAL CONDITION THAT TYPICALLY EMERGES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND AFFECTS BEHAVIOUR, SOCIAL INTERACTION, AND COMMUNICATION (NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY, 2025). SYMPTOMS OFTEN APPEAR BETWEEN TWO AND THREE YEARS OF AGE, AND IN SOME CASES DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE (NHS, 2022). HOWEVER, THE TIMING, VISIBILITY, AND SEVERITY OF EARLY SIGNS VARY CONSIDERABLY, CREATING CHALLENGES FOR EARLY IDENTIFICATION. EARLY DETECTION IS WIDELY RECOGNISED AS CRITICAL, AS TIMELY INTERVENTION IS ASSOCIATED WITH IMPROVED COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL FUNCTIONING, EMOTIONAL REGULATION, AND LONG-TERM EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES (FULLER AND KAISER, 2020). DESPITE THIS, MANY CHILDREN EXPERIENCE DELAYS IN DIAGNOSIS DUE TO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN PRESENTATION AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS WITHIN HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION SERVICES.

IDENTIFICATION AND DIAGNOSIS

CHILDREN WITH ASD MAY DEMONSTRATE DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION, PLAY, AND BEHAVIOUR, INCLUDING REDUCED EYE CONTACT, DELAYED OR ATYPICAL SPEECH DEVELOPMENT, LIMITED PRETEND PLAY, REPETITIVE BEHAVIOURS, RESTRICTED INTERESTS, AND ATYPICAL SENSORY RESPONSES (OKOYE ET AL., 2023; AUTISM SPEAKS, 2019). SOCIAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES MAY INVOLVE DIFFICULTIES INTERPRETING FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, MAINTAINING RECIPROCAL INTERACTION, AND FORMING PEER RELATIONSHIPS (NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY, 2025). HOWEVER, THESE CHARACTERISTICS MAY BE SUBTLE DURING EARLY DEVELOPMENT OR MASKED BY ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES. RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS THAT AUTISTIC GIRLS ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO UNDERDIAGNOSIS, AS THEY OFTEN CAMOUFLAGE SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES BY MIMICKING PEERS, SUPPRESSING REPETITIVE BEHAVIOURS, OR USING LEARNED SOCIAL SCRIPTS (LAI ET AL., 2015). DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA HISTORICALLY GROUNDED IN MALE-CENTRIC PRESENTATIONS FURTHER CONTRIBUTE TO GENDER DISPARITIES IN IDENTIFICATION, ALONGSIDE CULTURAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PARENTAL HELP-SEEKING AND PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION (DANIELS AND MANDELL, 2014).

IN THE UK, EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF ASD IS SUPPORTED THROUGH DEVELOPMENTAL SURVEILLANCE, SCREENING TOOLS, AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT IN ACCORDANCE WITH NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND CARE EXCELLENCE (NICE) GUIDELINES (NICE, 2021). SCREENING INSTRUMENTS SUCH AS THE MODIFIED CHECKLIST FOR AUTISM IN TODDLERS, REVISED WITH FOLLOW-UP (M-CHAT-R/F) ARE COMMONLY USED TO IDENTIFY CHILDREN AT RISK BETWEEN 16 AND 30 MONTHS OF AGE (ROBINS ET AL., 2014). WHILE SUCH TOOLS CAN SUPPORT EARLY RECOGNITION, THEIR PREDICTIVE ACCURACY IS LIMITED. RESEARCH INDICATES THAT A SIGNIFICANT PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO SCREEN POSITIVE DO NOT LATER RECEIVE AN ASD DIAGNOSIS, WHILE MANY WHO SCREEN NEGATIVE ARE DIAGNOSED AT A LATER STAGE (SHARP, 2023). THESE FINDINGS DEMONSTRATE THAT SCREENING TOOLS SHOULD NOT BE USED IN ISOLATION BUT MUST BE SUPPLEMENTED BY CLINICAL JUDGEMENT AND COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT. ADDITIONALLY, SCREENING ACCURACY VARIES ACROSS CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC, AND SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS, RAISING CONCERNS ABOUT EQUITY WHEN TOOLS ARE APPLIED WITHOUT APPROPRIATE ADAPTATION OR FOLLOW-UP (HUDA, 2014; WETHERBY, 2021).

DESPITE POLICY EMPHASIS ON EARLY DIAGNOSIS, SYSTEMIC BARRIERS CONTINUE TO DELAY ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION. NICE RECOMMENDS TIMELY, MULTIDISCIPLINARY DIAGNOSTIC PATHWAYS; HOWEVER, LONG WAITING TIMES AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES ACROSS NHS SERVICES HIGHLIGHT A DISCONNECT BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE (NICE, 2021; DESHMUKH, 2025). DUE TO HIGH DEMAND, WORKFORCE SHORTAGES, AND THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENTS, WAITING TIMES FOR AUTISM DIAGNOSIS MAY RANGE FROM SEVERAL MONTHS TO OVER TWO YEARS (PARR ET AL., 2024). THESE DELAYS REDUCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY INTERVENTION, AS SUPPORT DELIVERED LATER IN DEVELOPMENT IS LESS IMPACTFUL (AUTISM SPEAKS, 2009).

IMPACT ON THE CHILD

DELAYED IDENTIFICATION HAS SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN. WITHOUT EARLY SUPPORT, CHILDREN FACE INCREASED RISKS OF DIFFICULTIES IN COMMUNICATION, LEARNING, SOCIAL PARTICIPATION, AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING (FULLER AND KAISER, 2020). UK COHORT STUDIES INDICATE THAT MANY CHILDREN ARE IDENTIFIED ONLY UPON SCHOOL ENTRY, DESPITE EARLIER SOCIAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES (HOSOZAWA ET AL., 2020). RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT DELAYED INTERVENTION IS ASSOCIATED WITH HEIGHTENED ANXIETY, REDUCED SELF-ESTEEM, SOCIAL ISOLATION, AND CHALLENGES IN EMOTIONAL REGULATION (FOX, WILLIAMS AND ASBURY, 2024). DIFFICULTIES IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING, AND ADAPTIVE SKILLS MAY PERSIST, WHILE SENSORY SENSITIVITIES AND REPETITIVE BEHAVIOURS CAN FURTHER LIMIT ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL AND DAILY ACTIVITIES (RAJ ET AL., 2024). THESE OUTCOMES HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUITABLE ACCESS TO TIMELY, INDIVIDUALISED SUPPORT DURING THE EARLY YEARS.

SUPPORT STRATEGIES

EVIDENCE HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF NEURODIVERSITY-INFORMED, EVIDENCE-BASED SUPPORT STRATEGIES IN MITIGATING THESE CHALLENGES. ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTATIONS, SUCH AS PREDICTABLE ROUTINES, VISUAL SCHEDULES, SENSORY-FRIENDLY SPACES, AND REDUCED SENSORY OVERLOAD, CAN SUPPORT EMOTIONAL REGULATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND LEARNING (KAHVECI ET AL., 2023). PARENT-MEDIATED INTERVENTIONS HAVE DEMONSTRATED POSITIVE EFFECTS ON SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIOUR, WHILE ALSO ENHANCING PARENTAL CONFIDENCE AND WELLBEING (WILL ET AL., 2018). SENSORY REGULATION STRATEGIES, INCLUDING QUIET SPACES, ADAPTED LIGHTING, AND STRUCTURED ENVIRONMENTS, FURTHER PROMOTE PARTICIPATION AND REDUCE ANXIETY (DRIFTE, 2013). HOWEVER, THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE APPROACHES DEPENDS ON PRACTITIONER TRAINING, RESOURCE AVAILABILITY, AND CONSISTENCY ACROSS SETTINGS (FULLER AND KAISER, 2020).



IMPACT ON PARENTS/FAMILIES

THE IMPACT OF DELAYED DIAGNOSIS EXTENDS BEYOND THE CHILD TO FAMILIES AND EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. PROLONGED ASSESSMENT PROCESSES AND UNCLEAR SUPPORT PATHWAYS CAN CAUSE SIGNIFICANT PARENTAL STRESS, ANXIETY, AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (SMITH-YOUNG ET AL., 2024). PARENTS OFTEN EXPERIENCE UNCERTAINTY REGARDING THEIR CHILD'S NEEDS AND FUTURE, WHICH MAY BE INTENSIFIED BY LIMITED PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION AND GUIDANCE (RODGERS, 2020). FAMILIES FROM BLACK, ASIAN, AND MINORITY ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS MAY ENCOUNTER ADDITIONAL BARRIERS RELATED TO LANGUAGE, CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING, AND FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS, CONTRIBUTING TO INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO SERVICES (NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY, 2023). MANY PARENTS REDUCE WORKING HOURS OR LEAVE EMPLOYMENT ALTOGETHER TO MEET CARE DEMANDS, INCREASING FINANCIAL STRAIN AND AFFECTING FAMILY WELLBEING (THE SENATE, 2024).

UNDERSTANDING AUTISM

A GENTAL GUIDE TO SUPPORT, AWARENESS AND INCLSION

THIS POSTER EXPLORES EARLY DETECTION AND DIAGNOSIS OF ASD, EXAMINES BARRIERS WITHIN CURRENT SYSTEMS, AND CONSIDERS THE IMPACT OF DELAYED DIAGNOSIS ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, ALONGSIDE EVIDENCE-BASED SUPPORT STRATEGIES



IMPACT ON SCHOOL/EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS AND SCHOOLS ALSO FACE SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING AUTISTIC CHILDREN. LIMITED AUTISM-SPECIFIC TRAINING, WORKFORCE PRESSURES, AND INCONSISTENT ACCESS TO SPECIALIST INPUT CAN REDUCE PRACTITIONER CONFIDENCE IN RECOGNISING EARLY SIGNS AND IMPLEMENTING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT (AMBITIOUS ABOUT AUTISM, 2025). IN WALES AND ACROSS THE UK, POLICY FRAMEWORKS EMPHASISE THE IMPORTANCE OF SKILLED PROFESSIONALS AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION; HOWEVER, UNEVEN ACCESS TO EXPERTISE UNDERMINES CONSISTENT EARLY INTERVENTION (WELSH GOVERNMENT, 2021; CARE QUALITY COMMISSION, 2022). WITHOUT TIMELY DIAGNOSIS OR STRUCTURED GUIDANCE, EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS MAY STRUGGLE TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE ADJUSTMENTS, AFFECTING INCLUSION, CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR, AND LEARNING OUTCOMES.

SUMMARY

IN CONCLUSION, EARLY DETECTION OF ASD IS ESSENTIAL BUT REMAINS CONSTRAINED BY DIAGNOSTIC COMPLEXITY AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS. DELAYS IN IDENTIFICATION LIMIT ACCESS TO EARLY INTERVENTION, WITH FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS. WHILE SCREENING TOOLS AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS PROVIDE VALUABLE GUIDANCE, EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION REQUIRES EQUITABLE SERVICE PROVISION, SKILLED PROFESSIONALS, AND NEURODIVERSITY-INFORMED PRACTICE. STRENGTHENING EARLY YEARS SYSTEMS THROUGH TIMELY ASSESSMENT, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, AND INCLUSIVE SUPPORT STRATEGIES IS CRITICAL TO IMPROVING DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES AND REDUCING INEQUALITIES FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

