



Understanding and Supporting ASD in Children

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Introduction

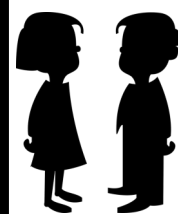
Autism is a lifelong condition, sometimes referred to as a spectrum, or the medical word Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviours (NIH, 2024). The identification and diagnosis of ASD involves multiple assessments, and early detection is critical for effective intervention (NHS, 2022). Despite the availability of diagnostic tools, barriers like sensory sensitivities and social communication difficulties significantly impact children's experiences in education (Grabrucker, 2021). One of the most widely recognized support strategies, the TEACCH approach, provides structured interventions tailored to autistic learners (Autism speaks, no date). This poster critically evaluates ASD diagnosis, the impact of barriers, and the effectiveness of TEACCH as a support strategy.

Identification and Diagnosis of ASD

The identification of ASD is typically conducted through developmental screenings, parent interviews, and standardized diagnostic tools such as the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS-2) and the DSM-5 criteria (Zwaigenbaum *et al.*, 2015). Practitioners and parents play a crucial role in recognizing early signs, which can include delayed speech, lack of eye contact, and repetitive behaviours (Yates and Le Couteur, 2016). However, the diagnostic process is complex, and several challenges arise. One significant issue is the delay in diagnosis, with many children being identified only after starting school. This delay can result in missed early interventions, which are crucial for cognitive and social development (Tsang *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, ASD symptoms often overlap with other conditions, such as ADHD and sensory processing disorders, leading to misdiagnosis or underdiagnosis (Dixon and Matson, 2024). Parental awareness is another key factor, as cultural and socio-economic differences influence the likelihood of seeking professional assessments (Fogler and Phelps, 2018). While an early diagnosis provides access to tailored interventions, legal recognition, and specialized support, it can also be a stressful process for families. The long waiting times for assessments further exacerbate the problem, delaying access to necessary support services. The waiting times in Wales is 74 weeks (Senedd Research, 2024). Although early detection is ideal, the variability in symptoms and diagnostic criteria creates disparities in how ASD is identified across different populations (NIH, 2023).

One of the most significant barriers for children with ASD is sensory sensitivity (Piller and Pfeiffer, 2016). Many autistic children experience heightened or diminished responses to sensory stimuli, including loud noises, bright lights, and crowded spaces. These sensitivities can result in distress and avoidance behaviours, making traditional classroom settings overwhelming. Sensory overload can lead to emotional meltdowns, difficulties in concentration, and withdrawal from learning activities. Courchesne, Gazestani and Lewis (2020) highlights that sensory processing difficulties can interfere with academic engagement, reducing participation and increasing stress levels. However, schools that implement sensory-friendly classrooms, such as those with quiet areas and adjustable lighting, report improved student engagement and well-being (Goodall, 2015). Another key barrier is social communication difficulties (Roy and Chiat, 2019). Children with ASD often struggle with understanding nonverbal cues, engaging in reciprocal conversations, and interpreting figurative language. These challenges can result in difficulties forming peer relationships, leading to social isolation and bullying (Humphrey and Hebron, 2015). Without targeted support, these barriers can significantly affect a child's emotional development and academic performance. However, research indicates that structured social skills training programs, such as the PEERS intervention, can improve peer interactions and overall social integration (Laugeson, 2014). While these strategies provide essential support, their effectiveness depends on consistent implementation and individualized approaches tailored to the needs of autistic learners (Franklin, 2024).

Barriers & Their Impact



1 in 50 children in Wales have ASD
With 4 to 7 times more likely to occur in **Boys** than in **Girls**.

Support Strategy: TEACCH (Treatment & Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children)

The TEACCH approach is a widely recognized intervention designed to support autistic individuals through structured teaching (Butler, 2016). This strategy emphasizes the use of visual supports, predictable routines, and individualized learning environments to enhance comprehension and reduce anxiety (Sanz-Cervera *et al.*, 2018). TEACCH promotes independence by incorporating structured work systems that help children understand expectations and organize their tasks. One of the primary benefits of this approach is its ability to provide clear and consistent routines, which are crucial for reducing stress and improving focus in autistic learners (Mesibov, 2018). Studies have shown that TEACCH increases engagement and task completion while minimizing behavioural challenges (Virues-Ortega *et al.*, 2017). However, the implementation of TEACCH requires extensive staff training and classroom modifications, which can be resource-intensive. Additionally, while TEACCH has proven to be effective for many autistic individuals, Turner-Brown *et al.* (2019) argue that its structured nature may limit opportunities for spontaneous learning and flexibility. Despite these challenges, long-term research indicates that TEACCH enhances life skills and academic performance, making it a valuable intervention for children with ASD. The effectiveness of this approach highlights the importance of structured educational support in addressing the challenges associated with ASD, but its success depends on ongoing adaptations to meet individual needs (Zeng *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

The process of identifying ASD is complex, requiring collaboration between professionals, parents, and educators. While early diagnosis facilitates access to support, delays and misdiagnoses present ongoing challenges. Sensory sensitivities and social communication difficulties are among the most significant barriers affecting autistic children's learning experiences. The TEACCH approach provides a structured framework that enhances comprehension and reduces anxiety, but it requires careful implementation to balance structure with opportunities for flexible learning. Future research should focus on adapting interventions to better support individual differences in ASD, ensuring inclusive education that meets the diverse needs of autistic learners.