

Ask Sarah...

Hi Sarah, my son has an intervention programme in place for his reading, is there anything I can do at home to help and support his learning?

Then reply with...

Thank you, Sarah, I will organise a meeting with his teachers to discuss this with them.

Introduction to me and the webinar

Hello and good evening, everyone thank you for joining us here tonight for the additional learning needs webinar.

My name is Emma Needham, and my student number is 2219500 and I am currently working in an observation and assessment unit with children who has ALN.

During this webinar there is going to be several speakers who are going to talk about ALN, I have decided to talk about Autism and what the signs of autism are and how the diagnosing process works. I will also be discussing some barriers that autistic children face and what support strategies for the children and their parents.

I understand that throughout this presentation some of you might have some questions, but could I kindly ask you all to wait until the end of my presentation to ask them. Once I have finished talking about autism, I will then answer any questions. Thank you.

What is autism?

According to the **National Autistic Society (2024)** autism is a developmental disorder and it can also be described as a spectrum disorder, this is because of how it affects everyone differently. Autism affects children in different ways for some children they have communicate difficulties and other children find it difficult to understand how people think or feel. Autistic children are often described as being neurodivergent because of how their brains work, children who have ADHA, dyslexia and dyspraxia are often also described as being neurodivergent. **(Barnardo's.org, 2022)**

The Autism Society of America (1997) stated that autism affects people's intellectual development which is why by knowing several different support strategies practitioners can make sure they are able to support everyone effectively.

Autism spectrum is an umbrella term that is used due to the complexity of autism, for some children they could have high functioning autism and for others they could have low functioning autism. Both of which are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. (Leatherland and Chown, 2015)

High-functioning autism is a term that is used to describe children who present relatively mild symptoms, and children who have high-functioning autism typically have fewer challenges in certain areas such as language and intellectual abilities. But low-functioning autism is also described as severe autism or level 3 autism in the Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorder and is used to describe children that have significant impairments in multiple areas of their development which can vary from child to child. (Kids on the Move 2024)

Autism affects both boys and girls but with the current research it has shown that autism is more common in boys meaning that for every four boys who get diagnosed there is only one girl. Some children will start presenting signs of autism as early as two years old resulting in them getting their diagnosis before they turn three. There is around 700,000 adults and children living in the UK who have been diagnosed with autism and although we know this number increases daily the statistics will not start showing the current number due to the increased time scale it is taking to diagnose children with ASD (Rees, Edwards. no date)

Common signs of autism

A few of the most common signs of autism could be that the child prefers to play on their own and if a child tries to interact and join in with their play then they will more often or not get up and move away. For some children they struggle to respond to their own name, this could be because of their understanding difficulty. Children with autism normally have a one major interest that they enjoy learning about and will be able to tell you a lot of information about their interest, however they would struggle to be interested in things that children of the same age are interested in. Most autistic children struggle with physical contact and for most parents or carers this is something they find extremely difficult especially when their child is hurt, upset or ill. I for one found this hard when I was a one to one for a beautiful autistic little boy, so I understand how hard this is for their parents or carers. Emotional difficulties are also a common sign, for most children they struggle to understand what emotions are and how to use them when responding to certain situations. This

can often come across as being inappropriate and those people who have an understanding on autism will know that the children do not mean to come across that way, however for adults who do not have an understanding on autism can become offended which is why educating people is extremely important. Although they are common signs of someone having autism, it is important that parents understand that there could be another explanation behind them. For example, a child could have a development delay and common signs like a communication difficulty could be the reason why children struggle to communicate, and it does not necessarily mean that the child is autistic. (Rees, Edwards. no date)

Communication is more than just verbal and for autistic children they have difficulties with visual communication too, maintaining eye contact with people can be very challenging for most autistic children resulting in a communication barrier. Having a communication difficulty can increase the child's vulnerability, this is because not only do they struggle to communicate their thoughts and feelings, but they also find it difficult to interpret and understand the intentions and actions of those around them. (preventing Exploitation Toolkit, no date)

Repetitive behaviour can also be another common sign and for most autistic children they need to have a routine to make them feel safe, again this can also just be something that children need to feel safe and to be able to understand what is coming next, this alone does not necessarily mean that the child is autistic. Routine can be important for everyone. Sticking to the child's normal daily routine helps the child to feel safe and in control and any slight change big or small can be difficult for the child to process and could lead in them having a meltdown, this can be prevented by making sure if there is a necessary need for a change in their routine that it is explained to the child in a way that they understand and this can be done verbally or through visual cards. Informing the child of the changes to their routine will reduce the chances of them becoming overwhelmed and confused and allowing them to still feel in control even though their routine has been changed. Repetitive behaviour can also mean movement, for example some autistic children they flap their hands, rock their whole bodies back and forth and simply make the same sounds repeatedly and this can also be described as stimming. When children start doing this it could mean that they are feeling anxious or stressed and by carrying out these actions can be something they need to do to be able to distress and to feel back in control. It is important that anyone who is involved in the child's life understands the signs and knows which ones the child is presenting. Understanding the child's individual signs is so important in knowing how to support them and be able to meet their needs sufficiently. (Beyond Autism, 2024)

Challenges/ barriers that autistic children and their families might face.

The UN convention on the rights of a person with Disabilities (2010) under articles 5 and 9 states that no one should be discriminated against due to a disability and that they should be protected against this, unfortunately children with autism and other additional learning needs and disabilities face discrimination nearly every single day. Most of the time this is done unintentionally for example when the government agree and provide funding for a new playground to be built, the planning of the new playground excludes children with ALN and disabilities. The government believe that by providing areas with new playgrounds they are providing all children with the same play opportunities, however the equipment that is installed in most playgrounds is not ALN friendly. However, with a few simple changes the government could make sure that they are designed to meet all of the children's needs regardless of their ALN or disability. Simple changes like that can make a child feel more included with society and they can also make children feel more confident.

One of the main challenges the children who attend the observation and assessment unit that I work in is not being able to attend their long-term placement due to the length of the waiting list. Once we have got the child diagnosed, we can then refer them to a setting that is going to support them and their ALN, but we cannot put their name on the list until they have been diagnosed. Autism should not define who a child is, however with the lack of spaces in the autistic units prevents children from moving forward in their education (NHS, 2022). There is a dire need for more autistic settings so that once a child has been diagnosed with autism, they can go to a setting that has been designed to support children's needs. Instead of the government spending money on new mainstream schools when there are plenty of them around, they should focus more on building more autistic and ALN settings so that every child is receiving the same opportunity to attend a setting that is better suited for them and their needs. We need more people who is passionate and dedicated in being the voices of the children with autism to stand up and speak out, we all need to work together and fight for what we believe in and that is that we need more facilities for autistic and ALN children. Together we can change the world to be more inclusive for autistic children. (Aspect, 2023)

NHS (2024) have a lot of useful information and links for parents and carers, again the link will be available on the information sheet should you wish to look at in your own time.

Diagnosing process

When parents or carers have gathered evidence on the common signs that their child seems to be presenting then they should speak to either their GP, Health Visitor, or a teacher, during this meeting they have with either one of the professionals they should express their

concerns and ask for a referral to get their child an autism assessment. 63% of local authorities reported an increase in the waiting time for a diagnosis and it is now exceeding the 3-month limit specified in the NICE guidelines (Public Health England, 2019). The reason for the increase in waiting time is down to the increase in the work load that specialists are facing, although GP's, health visitors and teachers can make a referral for an autistic assessment unfortunately they have no legal authority to give an official diagnosis. (Rees-Edwards, no date)

Support strategies.

Autism Speaks (2024) have listed 14 support strategies that they believe work in supporting teachers to maintain and calm and positive classroom. One of the suggestions was to get the parents to complete a form called "all about me", the form will be used to gain a clear understanding of the child's needs and what they need to feel supported. In a classroom full of children, it can be difficult to make sure all of the children are feeling safe and secure at once; however, the support does not need to be from an adult. In my setting some of the children use the areas that have been set up as a calming area, for example we have a transition room that the children can access when they are feeling overwhelmed. By having this transition room, we know that when the children start feeling overwhelmed and need to take time out of the busy day to day life within the classroom, they can go to the transition room and use the support tools that have been implemented in that room.

Visual aids can also be an effective support strategy, this can be used within the classroom and at home. Routine is very important to most autistic children and having their timetable in a visual format that they can see with help to maintain the safe and secure environment they need. There are many benefits of using visuals for children with autism for example it allows the teaching staff to create a shared understanding of the day, providing the children with structure and routine. It keeps the classroom feeling organised, creating a safe and calm environment which is important for children with autism. It also provides opportunities to promote independence and makes the children become more confident when they are at school, once children feel safe and confident they become less frustrated, and their anxiety levels are reduced making the school day feel more welcoming for the children. However this is something that the whole school would need to implement, it would only take one member of staff who does not follow this to make the whole strategy become less effective. (Autism Toolbox, 2019)

So, to conclude this webinar, it is important that the staff working with autistic children are all working together when it comes to supporting the children and their families, keeping a good line of communication between the staff and their families has shown to be effective during the autism diagnosis.

Thank you for listening, does anyone have any questions that they would like to ask?

Hi Emma, I was wondering if I could come to see your transition room because this is something we would like to implement in our setting.

Thank you, Sam, of course this is something I can arrange with you after the webinar has finished. If anyone else would also like to come and have a look around our transition rooms, then please stay behind after the webinar and I will arrange this with you all. In my setting we operate an open-door policy which means that you can come and have a look around on a time and date that better suits you.

Would anyone else like to ask any further questions...

No, Well thank you once again. I am now going to pass you back over to Sarah...

How to Spot Autism and how to get a diagnosis.

Brainwave (2023) stated that Autism normally presents itself in the early childhood stage however there have been times when individuals might not be diagnosed until later in life. There are often common characteristics that present themselves in children with Autism, some of them are more noticeable than others for example communication difficulties could be seen as a sign of Autism or it could just be seen as a simply delay. Some children suffer with sensory sensitivity, this could be the children not wanting to get dirty so they will shy away from any messy activities, or they might be sensitive to items of clothing making getting dressed something they struggle with. Another characteristic is that a struggle with expressing their feelings this is because they have no understanding on what emotions are and what each one represents, due to this they will also struggle with being able to relate to those around them and due to emotions being unpredictable this can have a big impact on children who have Autism. Although these are common signs for Autism they can sometimes be passed off as just being a young child or those around the child often have or make an excuse for why the child is behaving the way they are meaning that they might not get the diagnosis in their early childhood. People need to have a better understand on what to look out for to make sure all children with Autism get the diagnoses as early as possible to be able to correctly support them. (Brainwave, 2023)

Communication is more than just verbal and for autistic children they have difficulties with visual communication too, maintaining eye contact with people can be very challenging for most autistic children resulting in a communication barrier. Having a communication difficulty can increase the child's vulnerability, this is because not only do they struggle to communicate their thoughts and feelings, but they also find it difficult to interpret and understand the intentions and actions of those around them. (preventing Exploitation Toolkit, no date) Although communication difficulties can be a sign of autism it can also be a sign of speech and language delay, it is important to understand that the child needs to be presenting more than one sign of autism to be diagnosed.

What support is out there?

NHS (2024) have a lot of useful information and links for parents and carers, again the link will be available on the information sheet should you wish to look. Some of the information provided is a list of common signs of autism and although this can be very useful and supportive for the parents it can also have a negative effect on them as well. For some parents or carers, they go into the denial stage of being told that their child might have autism and seeing the signs that their child is presenting on the NHS website could push them further in to the denial stage. This could result in them not seeking the help and advice they need to get their child diagnosed.

A support strategy for both communication barriers and repetitive behaviour could be visual cards, for some children they need to see things in picture form to be able to understand what is going on and visual cards can do this. With visual cards they can be created around the child's routine and their likes and dislikes, so they are something that becomes personal to them. Most settings use visual cards and although they have shown that they are a positive support strategy unfortunately they do not always work for every child. For some children they struggle with concentrating long enough to gain an understanding so trying to get the child to concentrate on what the visual card is saying can be difficult, meaning that this support strategy does not work for everyone.

What is Autism.

According to the National Autistic Society (2024) autism is a developmental disorder and it can also be described as a spectrum disorder, this is because of how it affects everyone differently. Autism affects children in different ways for some children they have communicate difficulties and other children find it difficult to understand how people think or feel. Autistic children are often described as being neurodivergent because of how their brains work, children who have ADHA, dyslexia and dyspraxia are often also described as being neurodivergent. (Barnardo's.org, 2022)

The Autism Society of America (1997) stated that autism affects people's intellectual development which is why by knowing serval different support strategies practitioners can make sure they are able to support everyone effectively.

Challenges surrounding Autism.

A challenge that the children in my setting face when we take them out is that people do not understand why they are behaving the way that they do. When we take them for toast the children find it difficult to wait and we know this is down to their difficulty in understanding so this can make the children feel anxious and overwhelmed causing them to have a meltdown, and when we are surrounded by people who do not understand autism and how children act in certain situations. We have had adults making inappropriate comments about the way that the children are acting, although this is so upsetting to witness it is down to the lack of education on autism. Beyond Autism (2024)

The length of the waiting list for an autistic setting is something that becomes a challenge and barrier for children with autism, children can only go on the waiting list after they have received a diagnosis and when they attend the observation and assessment unit the expected timescale is that they stay with us for up to two school terms. However, in the past some children have stayed there for over three years. Although we do not let autism define who a child is, it does in fact define where they go from my setting, as a teaching assistant it is very difficult to watch the children who stay long term in my setting. This is because the setting is only designed for short term periods and once a child gets their diagnoses, we know that the environment is not meeting their needs, for some children it ends up becoming a trigger and not having the right resources or staffing we know we cannot help them effectively. We need to make a change and build more settings so that we can provide more ADS spaces and we can give the children the same opportunities as other children of the same age group. NHS (2022)

Conclusion

The conclusion of this poster is that we need to make changes in education so that everyone gets educated on autism so we can normalise autism and make the world more inclusive for everyone.

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