

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in early years?

NHS (2022) states that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects a child's ability to interact, communicate, learn and their behaviour. Moreover Neurodivergence Wales (no date) also suggests that by the ages of two to three, symptoms such as delayed speech, restricted eye contact, a predilection for solitary play, or rigid rituals often would be noticed. Since its features vary greatly, it is a spectrum that requires which would require specific support early on.



Sunshine support (no date)

Autism Education Trust (no date) states that children with autism frequently encounter substantial educational challenges. These can be addressed by ensuring that supportive educational settings are structured, consistent and accepting of all differences. Autistic children deserve a setting that is saturated with high-quality and inclusive education. Practitioners must be aware of the three major areas of difference in autism and how they affect how autistic children learn and interact in educational environments. Understanding autistic children requires knowledge about autism and its differences. Staff must take into account differences such as social communication and understanding, sensory processing and integration, as all children with autism have different needs. Furthermore, according to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) the child and class teachers or early years practitioners have an obligation to guide students in early detection of students who may be suffering, particularly those who are limiting their academic growth. When challenges are discovered, they should be discussed with the child's family and the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) to determine the best course of action, which may include formal evaluation and referral if necessary.

While many screening and assessment approaches may be effective for an assessment based on the child's needs and identification, mainstream educators who do not have specialised training should use them with care. To further support children with autism, visual supports and organised routines are an effective support method for children with autism in early education settings. According to the Autism Education Trust (2020), visual timetables, image cards, and consistent routines can help young children with autism to minimise anxiety and communicate more effectively.

Sensory circuits are a type of sensory integration intervention. This should be done first thing at school and after lunch time. It consists of a series of physical activities intended to alert, organise and calm the child. The sensory circuit tries to improve sensory processing by assisting children in regulating and organising their senses in order to achieve the correct degree of attention required for effective learning. The circuit should be an engaging, physical and an enjoyable activity for children.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) IN EARLY YEARS

Autism in early years settings

According to the National Autistic Society (2023), social communication and routine changes can be difficult for children, with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which may have an impact on their involvement in nursery activities, such as a four year old with autism might frequently play alone, avoid making eye contact and get upset when switching between activities. These behaviours might point to a further need for learning and prompt the practitioners to start making observations and assessments from an early stage and early detection of SEND is crucial because it enables the implementation of treatments and support, according to the Department for Education (2015).

This is important as children learn through social interaction and support from others, according to Vygotsky (1978). According to this view, children with autism may need more adult supervision and assistance to support them in taking advantage of educational opportunities. Piaget (1952), similarly believes that children learn by active exploration, however children with autism may encounter obstacles that prevent them from fully participating without the right support to accommodate their needs.

Mackenzie, Cologon and Fenech (2016) suggests that rather than trying to change the child, inclusive practice should focus on reducing barriers in the environment, this also relates to the social model of disability, which holds that problems result from circumstances that are not tailored to each person's needs.

How to support children with Autism in classrooms

Barriers

Early childhood settings children with autism may encounter social, communicative and sensory obstacles that affect their learning and growth. A child may experience frustration and mental distress if they are unable to communicate their needs or fully understand instructions due to communication issues. According to the National Autistic Society (2023), children with autism frequently have communication and interactional difficulties that could affect their ability to participate in group activities.

In nursery settings, sensory barriers are very common, children with autism may become overwhelmed by loud noises, bright lights and crowded classrooms, this can lead to anxiety or activity withdrawal. A child may find it difficult to participate in educational activities if they feel upset during carpet time because of the noise levels. also another Barrier is with childhood educators, MacLeod and Perepa (2020) discovered that several early childhood educators lacked confidence in detecting early indicators of autism. This could delay intervention and limit the of support interventions. Furthermore, insufficient training and a lack of resources might create systemic barriers that prevent participation or confidence to seek the correct support or intervention.

Furthermore, social difficulties may also limit children with autism's capacity to form friendships, such as difficulties in recognising social cues and ways to communicate might lead to isolation from others. According to Nutbrown and Clough (2014), inclusive early childhood education is critical for providing equitable opportunity and positive social experiences for children with additional learning needs, these impediments can have an impact on the child's emotional well-being, confidence, and academic success. Autistic children who may not receive adequate support may feel anxiety, exclusion and have decreased involvement in learning activities.

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